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# Radical Representations, Eruptive Moments: The Documentary Aesthetic in American Literature, 1890-Present

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# Radical Representations, Eruptive Moments: The Documentary Aesthetic in American Literature, 1890- Present

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of the University of Colorado  
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

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Department of English

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This thesis entitled:  
Radical Representations, Eruptive Moments:  
The Documentary Aesthetic in American Literature, 1890-Present

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has been approved for the Department of English

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4th August 2010

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Date

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

# ABSTRACT

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Armstrong, Jennifer Nicole, Ph.D., (English Department)

Radical Representations, Eruptive Moments: The Documentary Aesthetic in American Literature, 1890-Present

Thesis directed by Professor Martin Bickman

Scholars have situated the emergence of a literary documentary aesthetic in the politically radical 1930s. My dissertation, “Radical Representations, Eruptive Moments: The Documentary Aesthetic in American Literature, 1890-Present,” revises this genealogy and traces the aesthetic to an earlier time, the 1890s. This aesthetic emerges alongside the development of visual technologies such as flash photography and the cinematograph, technologies that altered reading practices and expectations. Though no concentrated documentary movement exists at the turn of the twentieth century, documentary techniques inform literary production. Specifically, these techniques result in hybrid narratives. Moreover, this documentary turn responds to eruptive moments—cultural, political, technological, and geological. The dominant characteristic of the aesthetic are radical representations that give voice and space to voices-from-the-margins accounts. These representations depend upon an ekphrastic visuality and an aural realism. This study identifies radical representations of race, gender, labor, memory, and place in literature from the late nineteenth century to the present. Each chapter focuses on a style of representation and designates this style as radical, even when the authors themselves have not (yet) been considered radical. Specifically, I examine Stephen Crane’s “new eyes” in “In the Depths of a Coal Mine” and other early writings, Charles W. Chesnutt’s “American eye” in *The Marrow of Tradition*, and Lee Smith’s documentary frames in her contemporary novels, *Oral History* and *On Agate Hill*. I argue that this aesthetic demands a new reading formation that transforms the reader into the reader-witness who must interact with documentary materials, such as letters, newspapers, photographs, and legal documents, in order to make meaning. I contend not that the texts in my study

function as documentaries but that they stand as cultural documents that reflect a changing relationship among author, text, and reader-witness. The documentary aesthetic influences writers from the major literary movements of realism-naturalism, modernism, and postmodernism. This dissertation asserts that American literature must be understood in relation to the documentary materials that inspire and inhabit it. The documentary aesthetic charts a course for attaining this new and more nuanced understanding.

# DEDICATION PAGE

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For Momma, Anna Paulette Carrier,

and for my love, Dave Krueger,

and to the memory of my grandfather, Albert Kenneth Carrier, 1922-2002

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# Introduction

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## Toward a Theory of a Literary Documentary Aesthetic

“Because a fire was in my head”

— William Butler Yeats, “The Song of Wandering Aengus”

“The origin of storms is not in clouds, / our lightning strikes when the earth  
rises, / spillways free authentic power”

— Muriel Rukeyser, “The Road”

From the earliest literary production, writers have relied upon documents to provide narrative materials or to serve as evidence that validates their stories. In ancient Greece, Herodotus wrote a massive historical work titled *The Histories*. This work carries the label of the first written documentary in Western literature. In 79 A.D., the Roman Pliny the Younger described in a letter to Tacitus the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius (Appendix 1). Pliny’s prose provides striking, beautifully rendered details about the eruption’s physicality (massive clouds, thick dust, a sea that seems to be moving backwards) while also revealing his status as a dedicated student (he keeps reading Livy even after the tremors begin) and depicting his emotional reactions and his concerns for his mother’s safety. Pliny demonstrates awareness of himself as both witness and writer. His letter can be classified as a nonfictional, personal document embellished with literary flourishes. His account of the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius illustrates the difficulties involved in accurate witnessing and authentic representation. It also demonstrates the permeability of the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction.

This dissertation focuses on much more recent literature, of course, but it examines the concerns that Pliny’s letter raises. In my study of nineteenth- and

twentieth-century American literature, I have identified a narrative reliance upon documents. That is putting it mildly, however. For American literature cannot be disentangled from the documents that inspire and inhabit it. In this dissertation, I inspect these documents, even the fictionalized ones, and identify, define, and analyze the literary documentary aesthetic that has shaped American literature since the late nineteenth century.

Most scholars have situated the emergence of a literary documentary aesthetic in the politically radical 1930s. However, rumblings of this aesthetic can be felt in the literary landscape from the beginnings of a national literature. The Puritans, after all, were ardent journal-keepers who recorded both quotidian matters and spiritual concerns for the benefit of their descendants as well as for the annals of history. The documentary aesthetic starts to take shape in the mid-nineteenth century and emerges at the turn of the twentieth century. This discovery pushes back the timeline of American documentary literature by at least forty years. My analysis begins with Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno" (1856), which I consider a foundational work in this aesthetic. I concentrate my analyses in turn-of-the-twentieth-century texts by Stephen Crane and Charles W. Chesnutt, then extrapolate my findings to contemporary novels by Lee Smith; a film, Elizabeth Barret's *Stranger with a Camera* (2000); and poems by Jake Adam York (2008).

This aesthetic, notable for its visuality, demands new reading formations, altering the reader into the reader-witness. I contend not that the American literary texts in my study function *as* documentaries (though some of them do) but that a documentary aesthetic characterizes much American literature, particularly works that belong to the category of realism. Certainly, literary works function as cultural documents. What I mean by documentary aesthetic, though, is an intimate and necessary connection between narration and documentation. Additionally, this

aesthetic depends upon a reader-witness who becomes active in interpreting the radical representations and reacting to the eruptive moments that these texts offer.

## Radical Representations

My term “radical” might seem perplexing. In this study, “radical” is an aesthetic term that carries political valences. I am using this word to denote expanded and expansive ways of seeing. The radical representations these authors offer dismantle standard literary and cultural fields of vision and erect new ones. “Radical” also fits with the role of the reader-witness, calling her to awareness and invoking a sense of social responsibility. I emphasize the word’s root definition, “fundamental,” meaning to get at the source or essence of a phenomenon. The literary representations that I highlight and analyze create apertures for seeing radically a phenomenon or issue. Stated simply, the documentary aesthetic radicalizes literature.

Radical shifts in perspective often originate in the margins, and the works in this study bear out that claim. As bell hooks says in “marginality as a site of resistance,” the margins can be empowered places instead of undesirable ones. In discussing her *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks clarifies her concept of marginality:

I was working...to identify marginality as much more than a site of deprivation. In fact, I was saying just the opposite: that it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance....It [marginality] offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds. (341)

Because 1930s radicalism is more familiar in literary scholarship, touching on it briefly helps to clarify earlier radical moves in literature. Literary scholar David

Minter asserts, “The vast documentary movement of the thirties extended the boundaries of ‘literature’ and also exposed the problematics imbedded in U.S. radicalism” (152). My brief mention of 1930s documentarians highlights the undeniable link between 1930s and 1890s documentary expression, and, though this dissertation is not an influence study, the work of the 1930s reflects a substantial debt to work that was produced on the fringes of modernism. This study, then, revises the genealogy of documentary work. While I second Minter’s claim that the 1930s were crucial in carrying out radical documentary projects, I also assert that the boundaries Minter mentions were already quite elastic during the 1890s and that much (radical) American literature of that decade lays the foundation for future documentary work. Therefore, a close study of that decade’s documentary aesthetic, which is underpinned by radical representations, is essential for clarifying and defining the aesthetic.

## **Eruptive Moments**

As Isobel Armstrong so succinctly puts it, “We remember that Theodore Adorno thought of fireworks as the essence of the aesthetic” (192). The term “eruptive” forges a connection between the narrative and the political. How does one document an eruption? Spike Lee’s documentary film, *When the Levees Broke* (2006), which contains much raw footage of a natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina (read: eruption), acknowledges the difficulties of this. It is nearly impossible to document eruptions, and perhaps that is why we attempt it. Documenting eruptions is akin to constructing narratives of trauma. There are always missing pieces, and these missing pieces are integral yet unavailable. In the late nineteenth century, eruptions across the globe spurred changes in the literary, political, and cultural landscapes of the United States. For example, in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Mark Twain alludes to the volcanic blasts in Indonesia in 1883, which were felt symbolically and culturally in

America. The dust from that explosion settled over the globe, in fact. The resulting Little Ice Age that occurred in Europe led to waves of immigration to the United States. The eruptions do not operate in isolation; they are always connected to something bigger and something beyond the moment in which they occurred. Furthermore, the eruptive visions and eruptive moments under study need not be cataclysmic. Rather, they can be more local or personal. For example, they can deal with seismic shifts in subjectivity.

One approach to dealing with seismic shifts, whether geological, political, social, or cultural, is to reflect the eruptive features in the aesthetic itself. Hybrid and amalgamated, the documentary aesthetic fits with eruptive narrative strategies and subjects. The twinned terms radical and eruptive have to do with envisioning difference *in* America and envisioning *a* different America. Of course, it is simplistic to see eruptions as momentary. They occur after much build-up, and then there is the aftermath. But what most people remember is the eruption itself—the volcano, earthquake, hurricane, or tornado; the race riot; the battle; the mining disaster. Much literature that relies upon a documentary aesthetic deals with all three stages: prelude, eruption, aftermath.

Historical context clarifies why this documentary aesthetic emerges in the 1890s. Regardless of the nature of the eruption, one point clearly resonated with the people who lived during those times: the world around them was changing rapidly. Some reacted by struggling against that change, as seen in the 1898 race riot in Wilmington, North Carolina. Charles Chesnutt chronicles this eruptive moment in American history in his novel, *The Marrow of Tradition*. He acts as a witness to the eruptive riot and invites the reader-witness to do the same. Readerly involvement is at the core of the documentary aesthetic at this time. Authors challenged their readers' sensibilities and politics with radical representations of eruptive moments. In realist and



naturalist fiction from the 1890s, the use of documentary evidence in the service of plot becomes exceedingly common and significant. For example, the twinned plots in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) develop because of the presence of crucial documents. Indeed, these documents, such as Judge Driscoll's will and the citizens' fingerprints, or natal autographs, possess so much validity that they seem like characters in the novel. Though I do not classify this fanciful novel as a documentary per se, I see it as key in tracing the development of a documentary aesthetic at the turn of the century.

Labor issues at the end of the nineteenth century act as a major set of eruptive moments in American history. Racial and gender issues also lead to many eruptive moments, many of which this nation is still dealing with. Linking these issues is the war or battle motif common in literary works at the end of the nineteenth century. War as a structuring motif arises from the fact of actual wars. The American Civil War raged from 1861-65. The U.S. government waged battles against Native Americans for decades in the nineteenth century. The Spanish-American War occurred in 1898. (Crane, Frank Norris, Richard Harding Davis, and other writers traveled to Cuba to report on it for U.S. newspapers.) Stephen Crane rendered all of his subjects—city life, coal mining, race relations, familial and romantic relationships—in terms of war.

A common thread unites much documentary work from the 1930s: the Great Depression that resulted from the stock market crash of 1929. This eruptive moment affected the lives of common Americans.

## **A Genealogy of Documentary Literature**

I alluded earlier to the Puritans, whose uneasiness with fiction led to the writing of meticulous records. Indeed, the American uneasiness with fiction has never disappeared. The documentary aesthetic is tied to the creation of a national identity

and national story. Accompanying my project are issues of national belonging – who belongs and who does not, who determines the criteria for belonging, whose voice resounds and whose remains unheard.

Other earlier texts play a role in this aesthetic. James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking tales have been described as proto-cinematic because of the way they convey movement across the frontier and initiate characters who will become stock figures in the Western genre. Another example is the Customs House section that frames Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* with fabricated documents. Yet another example is the slave narrative, including Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass. Later writers, such as Mark Twain and Sarah Orne Jewett, refer to "human documents," which constitute a broad category of documentation, including such diverse markers as fingerprints, portraits, and legal documents. These human documents occur most frequently in local color literature from the late nineteenth century. Though generally regarded as sentimental, local color literature attempts to preserve vanishing customs and cultures. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, documents produced a cataloguing effect. Walt Whitman pioneers this technique in *Song of Myself* in his lists of labors, laborers, and other physical details from New York street scenes. In the 1930s, the catalogue becomes a modernist device that signals difficulties with representation. This is the case in James Agee's part of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The catalogue works in concert with Agee's thick description, a term from anthropologist Clifford Geertz.

Works with reputations as documentary literature include sections of William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900); the inter-chapters in Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925) and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939); the camera eye and newsreel sections of John

Dos Passos's *U.S.A. Trilogy*, particularly *The 42nd Parallel* (1930-36); numerous proletarian novels and plays from the 1930s, most of which are little known now; Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965); and E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975). Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) possesses strong documentary details of place, people, and the habits and vicissitudes of travel.

The 1930s was the era of documentary books, such as Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), Sherwood Anderson's *Hometown* (1940), Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), and James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). These blended essays and photographs to give a fuller picture of a place or an issue. The Farm Security Administration, a New Deal government agency, commissioned many of these works. These works did not provide a simple historical record, however. Miles Orvell asserts, "F.S.A. documentary was conceived, in short, as a probable fiction, a credible facsimile" (231). Indeed, these books suggest what a population or place might be like, not necessarily what it was like. Moreover, they illustrate how unstable the boundaries are between fiction and nonfiction. This was also the decade for experimental documentary poetry, such as Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony* (1934) and Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead" (1938). In the American scene, notable documentary films from this decade include Pare Lorentz's F.S.A.-commissioned *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1938).

In *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Howells flirts with radical representations. *Hazard* illustrates middle-class life in 1890 New York. The protagonist, Basil March, and his wife, Isabel, search the city for an apartment in what has been referred to as a 90-page documentary section. Indeed, these pages contain impressive and sometimes overwhelming descriptions of street scenes and domestic interiors. The novel builds to a depiction of the Haymarket Riots that Basil, a magazine editor, witnesses from a

remove. Indeed, this labor eruption signals a turning point in Howells's own political consciousness. Perhaps more important is Howells's move to relate voices-from-the-margins accounts and perspectives, such as those of women (Isabel) and those of immigrants (Lindau). The sociopolitical eruption at the end builds upon earlier, smaller eruptive moments. For example, after a day of fruitless searching for apartments leads the Marches through the tenements, Isabel finds herself haunted by the scenes they encountered.

The narrative's insistence upon "the facts" furthers the documentary feel. This phrase also signals that this family's perspective is about to shift from romantic notions to more realistic ones. In the previous chapter, Basil March has waxed enthusiastically about how "the whole city" is "incomparably picturesque" (53). It is also in this chapter, however, that the reader-witness notices a grotesque eruptive detail that haunts Isabel March. She awakens from a dream that is at first about her children but that transmogrifies into the image of "a hideous thing with two square eyes and a series of sections growing darker and then lighter, till the tail of the monstrous articulate was quite luminous again" (53). When she relates the dream to Basil, he dismisses the nightmarish image as a representation of the desirable but elusive New York flat for which they have been searching, but this experience of the grotesque illuminating the periphery points to several anxieties prevalent in the 1890s: political unrest, a general feeling of the unreality of one's surroundings, the instability of the domestic sphere, including a theme of dispossession and homelessness, and the omnipresence of the camera. Indeed, the image Isabel imagines recalls the camera eye and the camera's flash. These moments of the flash constitute a major structuring element of documentary writing of the 1890s. Thus, Howells, not noted for his stylistic innovations, deserves credit for ushering in a literary move toward the documentary. Documentary characteristics and materials

appear more frequently as realism becomes identified as a literary movement and thus as a more desirable approach in literature.

### **What We Talk about When We Talk about Documentary**

Jeremy Bentham, the English utilitarian philosopher, provides the first recorded use of the word “documentary,” tying the term to legal evidence in his 1827 *Rationale of Judicial Evidence* (Druick). According to Bentham, the judicial system of his time made more use of testimony than documentary, or material, evidence, a detail that suggests that Bentham was either championing or heralding a change in what counts as reliable evidence in a courtroom. Bentham is most remembered for generating the idea of the panopticon prison, a structure in which a central tower overlooks every cell in the building, thereby placing all inmates under seemingly constant surveillance. Witness testimony becomes more suspect after the invention of the panopticon.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “documentary” as follows: “factual; realistic; applied especially to a film or literary work, etc., based on real events or circumstances, and intended primarily for instruction or record purposes” (“Documentary”). I use both the nominal and adjectival forms of the word “documentary” in this study. A novel may be *a* documentary, or it may be described as documentary or documentary-like. Even when neither application works perfectly, literary works often draw upon the documentary tradition of epistolary novels, films, and photography. When British film documentarian John Grierson applied the word “documentary” to Robert Flaherty’s 1927 ethnographic film *Moana*, he stated that the film possessed “documentary value” (qtd. in Hardy 26). He elaborated that documentary is “a creative treatment of actuality” (qtd. in Hardy 13). This definition is both helpful and confounding, for it renders elusive a documentary genre. Film scholar Robert Stam even calls documentary a

“transgenre” (14). This label applies to literary production as well. Considering that documentary work often deals with social and cultural anxieties and eruptions and that documentarians bring their own experiences and knowledge to a project, the protean nature of the term seems fitting, for no two writers would tell the same story or produce the same document.

Documentary, like its cousin, realism, proves an unwieldy term. Yet wield it we do. Everyone, it seems, engages in some form of documentary these days. It surrounds us, from films that become box-office successes to postings on Facebook to YouTube videos to reality television to fiction and poetry that increasingly work from documents and are inscribed by documents, whether “authentic” or fictionalized. How important is realism to this work? According to Barbara Foley, author of the first book-length study of documentary fiction, the documentary novel of the nineteenth century “intersects with the major tradition of realism”; however, it is “distinguished [from the realist novel] by its insistence that it contains some kind of link to the historical world” (26). This “link” sounds rather tenuous, much like the definitions of “documentary” that I have cited. Indeed, studies of documentary literature (and film) are rife with uncertainties. Bill Brown claims that the “realist imperative [is] to make things visible” (218). This literary imperative resonates in Dziga Vertov’s kino-eye credo that film must “make visible the invisible.” What, exactly, must be made visible?

Documentary literature and film are difficult to define. Though a fascinating, compelling body of scholarship exists on documentary film, relatively little has been undertaken on documentary literature. Whereas documentary is an established category in film, it has not yet achieved that status in literature. I suspect that this lack is due to the very difficulties of defining the genre or sub-genre, especially when the lines may seem arbitrary. For instance, where lie the differences among

documentary literature, historical fiction, and creative nonfiction? How necessary are documents themselves to the construction of documentary literature?

Documentary materials range widely. In addition to the expected letters and legal documents, these materials include photographs, films, songs, and sounds.

Moreover, each kind of document functions differently on the page. Documentary visuality is the easiest to identify and analyze, just as visual imagery is primary in prose and poetry. Most of us depend heavily upon the sense of sight, and this orientation translates to our reading and interpretive practices. Though vision remains the privileged sense in documentary literature, especially because of its borrowings from and comparisons to visual culture, the visual elements work in concert with the auditory and the tactile elements. I am not suggesting that writers import photographs, films, and recordings wholesale into their works. Rather, writers present these media – these sources – ekphrastically. The words on the page suggest the presence of something that is absent. Thus, in Muriel Rukeyser's "The Road," the poet introduces us to a photographer (presumably male) unpacking his tripod. The reader-witness is aware of the the photographer. The language that follows suggests photographs being taken, even though that feat is technically impossible on the printed page.

As with modes of cultural production and transmission, notions of what documentary work is and does are always shifting. In a sense, documentary work is impossible work. It straddles the border between fiction and nonfiction and runs numerous risks – of being too much, too boring, too incendiary, too biased, too insular, too distanced, or too something else. Film scholar Bill Nichols provides useful discussions and analyses of contemporary movements in documentary expression, often linking changing formats and subjects to a shifting epistemology. Moreover, his discussion of epistemophilia, or the love of knowledge, describes how

an experience with documentary leads to a desire for more and more knowledge, a phenomenon whose power I affirm. Nichols's *Blurred Boundaries* begins with the following declaration:

Traditionally, the word *documentary* has suggested fullness and completion, knowledge and fact, explanations of the social world and its motivating mechanisms. More recently, though, documentary has come to suggest incompleteness and uncertainty, recollection and impression, images of personal worlds and their subjective construction. A shift of epistemological proportions has occurred....Documentary and fiction, social actor and social other, knowledge and doubt, concept and experience share boundaries that inescapably blur. (1)

A productive, reciprocal relationship exists between literary and filmic modes of representation, and both documentary film and film theory inform my project. Throughout this study, I borrow terminology from film studies. In addition to borrowing vocabulary, I draw parallels between visual technologies and a visual turn in literature that came about at the turn of the twentieth century, intensified during modernism, and remains an integral component of literature. Of course, the cinema was not new in 1895. The magic lantern, one of its precursors, had existed for a couple of centuries before then. Literature on the cusp of these technological developments reflects them, demonstrates newfound styles of representation, and questions what is real and what constitutes reality. This melding of image and text results in a literary visuality that illuminates the real while leaving room for the fictional and symbolic.



Perhaps more important is Jean-Louis Baudry's notion of our desire, time out of mind, to project images. He links this desire to Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." Just as projected images emerge from both empirical reality and dreams, so, too, does documentary work belong in both realms, those of waking and dreaming. Errol Morris's documentary films provide compelling examples of this melding. Megan Cunningham asserts, "To watch a Morris documentary is to enter a dreamlike reality" (50). Morris, himself, says,

Most documentaries...are about some external reality. I suppose the very term *documentary* makes you think that is what a documentary should be about, providing a description of an exterior world, a public world, a world that's available to all of us. But part of what documentary can be is subjective, an attempt to explore how people see the world, their own mental landscape, their own private way of seeing themselves and the world around them. (qtd. in Cunningham 64)

This convergence of reality and dream is a pattern I have noted in the literary works I have studied. For example, Truman Capote punctuates *In Cold Blood*, a novel labeled as documentary, nonfiction, and true crime, with court documents and letters, especially the latter. However, he also narrates Perry Smith's, one of the murderers, dreams. At times, the distinction between the empirical world of the document and the imaginary world of the dream blurs. Descriptions of the road, endless and hazy, and of Perry and Dick Hickok's foray into Mexico also possess a dreamlike quality. Capote did not witness the events or places that he describes to the reader-witness, yet his accounts, even the dreamlike sequences, count as realism.

The presence of so many subjective elements requires careful framing. Indeed, documentary work depends upon meticulous framing. This is particularly true of

fiction from the nineteenth century, to return to the impetus of this study. Orvell asserts,

One dominant mode in the popular culture in the late nineteenth century was...the tendency to enclose reality in manageable forms, to contain it within a theatrical space, an enclosed exposition or recreational space, or within the space of the picture frame. If the world outside the frame was beyond control, the world inside of it could at least offer the illusion of mastery and comprehension. (35)

Yet how intact are these frames? And what materials or impulses construct the frames themselves, the representational frames? What happens when a reader-witness scrutinizes the frames? Or when images erupt out of the frames? The documentary aesthetic that I am outlining enframes specific problems but points to larger concerns as well. In other words, what is under scrutiny is not only the contents of the frames but also the constructedness of them. To this end, each work I examine points to a larger cultural story. In Stephen Crane's "In the Depths of a Coal Mine," the larger story involves the use of magic lantern lectures and flash photography to raise awareness of social injustices, particularly in terms of labor. In Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*, the larger story is racially-motivated violence and how this is linked to media representations at the turn of the twentieth century. These representations include newspaper stories and editorials as well as photographs about the 1898 race riot in Wilmington, North Carolina. Chesnutt uses double exposure suggestively and subversively to promote an alternative to what he terms the American eye. In Lee Smith's novels, *Oral History* and *On Agate Hill*, and Elizabeth Barret's film, *Stranger with a Camera*, the focus is on the larger story of representations of the Appalachian South, both historically and in their

contemporary iterations. Both women comment self-reflexively on the act of documenting and the politics of representation. At stake are examinations of female subjectivity and empowerment. Exchange is crucial to the documentary aesthetic as well. Paula Rabinowitz remarks, “Documentary is based on exchange,” and “exchanges and boundary crossings are crucial to the political projects of radical documentaries” (6). I seek to bring together acts of framing and boundary crossing.

What is documentary literature’s purpose? One purpose is educational. Robert Coles notes that the word “documentary” originates in the Latin *docere*, to teach. The etymology also includes the act of showing or demonstrating. But documentary literature is also about pushing generic boundaries and breaking rules. A result of this experimentation is self-reflexivity, a trait that draws attention to a work’s creation and constructedness. Documentary literature’s aim, then, is generally not escapism, but encounter and witnessing. Indeed, it is more focused on promoting awareness of the events that impact our lives and of promoting change. One work can be part documentary and part not. What I am attempting is a cultural studies reading of a literary documentary aesthetic that borrows from visual culture but also resonates in it. This dissertation illustrates that authors construct or enhance a documentary aesthetic to illuminate cultural conflicts and shifts and to involve the reader-witness in these shifts.

“I had better amplify this,” says Agee about his exploration of actuality in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The following is my amplification. It is a true story.

## **Framing the Documentary Aesthetic: A Brief Study of Melville's "Benito Cereno"**

"But if the story was not true, what was the truth?"

— Amasa Delano in "Benito Cereno" (699)

Barbara Foley's seminal work on documentary fiction prompts me to re-visit a text she touches on only briefly. A reading of Herman Melville's evocations of documents in "Benito Cereno" proves instructive for my project. Published in 1856 in his short-story collection, *The Piazza Tales*, the story is a re-telling of an attempted slave rebellion aboard a Spanish ship in 1799. Foley reads "Benito Cereno" as a work of "abolitionist documentary fiction," documentary because of Melville's use of court transcripts: "Melville's incorporation of the transcript of the Africans' trial into "Benito Cereno" assures the reader that his tale of rebellion and revenge is not a speculative flight of fancy" (267). She describes these transcripts as "heavily overdetermined documentary materials" (250). "This documentary material does not simply corroborate the text's status as a replication of real historical events, however; it also provides a satiric commentary upon the very pretense of legal – and empirical – neutrality" (251). I expand Foley's rather limited reading of documents to comment upon other documentary materials at work in the story. These documentary elements require acts of reading on the part of character and reader-witness.

Two 1856 advertisements for Herman Melville's *The Piazza Tales* provide a telling passageway into acts of reading and misreading in "Benito Cereno." One ad states, "Buy this book and take it into the country with you, where its hearty, healthy vivacity will gratify and excite as much as its deep undertone of native poetry, inspired by rural scenes, will soothe" (qtd. in Parker 762). Another ad announces, "In

the Cars, on the Steamboats, at all Bookstores in city and country, and for SALE EVERYWHERE MELVILLE'S PIAZZA TALES" (qtd. in Parker 762). These ads do more than sound glib and exuberant; they caution readers not to bring Melville's volume too close to the hearth. Indeed, the ads issue an imperative that readers take the book to open spaces where, they imply, consumption of its contents will be safer. Furthermore, consumption is best accompanied by movement—the kind one experiences on a pleasure cruise down the Hudson River, for example. These ads also attempt to persuade readers to see Melville in a new light and to create a new marketplace niche for his writing after the literary disaster of his "domestic novel," *Pierre*. Melville's fiction had treated voyages and adventures prior to *Pierre*, and Melville's foray into writing a bildungsroman about a troubled young man had proven disturbing to his readers, who expected travel tales. On the surface, these advertisements are merely commercial documents. Underneath the surface, however, they intimate the themes of reading, misreading, and containment prevalent in "Benito Cereno."

"Benito Cereno" hardly fits in the category of open-air reading. Rather, it presents acts of reading as unstable and dangerous. The story's narrator, Amasa Delano, engages in numerous reading practices, including gauging the validity of oral accounts, assessing the legibility of bodies, and interpreting the roles of public and private spaces. Unfortunately, Delano is prone to misreadings. Nina Baym asserts that Melville found fiction-writing and truth-telling antithetical (909). She notes, however, that Melville was most successful at the short form, for its limitations were freeing. She explains, "While the stories ["Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno"] invite us to supply interpretations..., they withhold any information that might enable us to judge the validity of our own interpretations. Boundary and enclosure, therefore, are the meanings of these works" (920). The architectural

structure of the piazza, which appears in the title story of Melville's collection, functions as one such boundary or enclosure: from a distance, the piazza frames a beautiful landscape; a closer view, however, reveals sharp distinctions between classes, thereby illuminating poverty, squalor, and injustice, motifs that recur throughout *The Piazza Tales* and throughout Melville's oeuvre.

Early in the story, Delano, an American sea captain of a ship called the *Bachelor's Delight*, relates unwittingly his anxieties concerning reading. Confounded by the unkempt appearance of the Spanish ship, the *San Dominick*, as well as by the behaviors aboard the ship, Delano expresses the following resolve:

But when that little mystery should have been cleared up, Captain Delano thought he might extremely regret it, did he allow Don Benito to become aware that he had indulged in ungenerous surmises. In short, to the Spaniard's black-letter text, it was best, for awhile, to leave an open margin. (Melville 694-95)

Throughout the story, Delano relies upon an illusion of his own control and dominance and speaks from what he assumes is a powerful, imperial voice, yet his account is continually invaded by voices from the margins. In this passage, he reads that he has the power to keep Cereno in the dark about his own "ungenerous surmises." (In the deposition, Cereno repeatedly characterizes Delano as "generous." This change suggests the ways that history gets written, re-written, and transmitted to reflect those in power.) The word "indulged" suggests that Delano has entertained stories that have taken him outside his comfort zone: who is this Spaniard, he wonders, and what lies or nefarious acts is he capable of? Delano gives Cereno a wide berth, so to speak, for Delano reads Cereno as a threatening racial other, and he fears him more than he does the slaves on the *San Dominick*. Moreover, in claiming

that he will give the “text” an “open margin” “for awhile,” he suggests the possibility of returning to the story to fill in the gaps.

The mention of the black-letter text allows Delano to subtly cast aspersions on Cereno’s text, that is, his oral account of the ship’s difficulties. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, black letter is a “name (which came into use about 1600) for the form of type used by the early printers, as distinguished from the ‘Roman’ type, which subsequently prevailed” (qtd. in Egan 1). Black-letter typeface, characterized by large, thick letters and Gothic script, was used for Bibles, religious texts, and legal documents. This passage is crucial in reading “Benito Cereno” as a confluence of documents and voices, and the metaphor of the black-letter text highlights this motif. Indeed, even in 1799, when “Benito” is set, the black-letter text would have been outmoded, used primarily for printing broadside ballads, stories that had formerly been transmitted orally and that were intended for consumption by the masses. Delano would not have read these ballads, but he would have recognized the legal uses of this script, for “[i]n the eighteenth century black letter ‘was still used for law-books, proclamations, licenses, etc.’” (Updike qtd. in Egan 2). Indeed, Delano may have encountered this script in nautical documents. However, when Melville wrote the story, this script was rare: “[b]y the nineteenth century, black letter had become an anachronism, used only sparingly and for antiquarian effect” (Egan 2). By calling attention to this typeface, Delano questions the Spaniard’s cultivation, education, and modernity. Delano suggests that if Don Benito still writes in black-letter script, he is an ineffective captain and navigator. Finally, it is worth noting that Delano calls Cereno’s version a “text,” not a story or an account. Delano extends this text to include Cereno’s status as a gentleman, which he judges according to Cereno’s appearance, and he reads Cereno as an “impostor.” Delano’s readings thus situate him in a hegemonic relationship to the Spaniard.

Another function of the black-letter text is to call to mind the Black Legend, the notion that Spanish colonialism was unnecessarily barbaric and brutal and, in the end, ineffective, but that British and American colonialism were comparatively mild, justifiable, and fueled by the desire to convert natives to Christianity. This myth would have been comforting to Delano, particularly because he finds himself so confused and directionless while on board the *San Dominick*. In confiding that he will leave an “open margin,” Delano suggests not only that part of the story of the *San Dominick*’s strange location and circumstances is yet to be revealed but also that he must remain skeptical of the story when he does hear it. Delano positions himself as a scholar capable of sifting through ambiguities, translating his experiences, and adding notes in the margins, as it were. Moreover, he assumes that two voices, his and Cereno’s, will speak in the service of colonialism but that only one voice will be correct. Delano emphasizes his felt superiority when he says, almost as an aside, “The very word Spaniard has a curious, conspirator, Guy Fawkish twang to it” (710). This comparison to Guy Fawkes equates Spaniards to underhanded political dealings. Delano keeps his fear of rebellion at a national and geographical remove, however, by likening Cereno to a British subversive, not an American or Caribbean one.

Melville sets his story “in the harbor of St. Maria—a small, desert, uninhabited island toward the southern extremity of the long coast of Chili” (673). This elongated, falsely precise description suggests, paradoxically, an air of desolation and lostness. The name Chile, in fact, comes from the Spanish word “chilli,” which means “the place where the world ends” (*OED*). Because the story takes place in an inexact locale, Melville is freer to write about politically risky subjects. Christopher Castiglia and Russ Castronovo mention the importance of having “Melville’s drama of revolution take place not within geographical boundaries but in the transnational



space of the high seas" (430). Indeed, Delano finds himself perplexed when he sees that "the stranger, viewed through the glass, showed no colors," and he becomes concerned about "the lawlessness and loneliness of the spot" (673).

Melville forces the reader-witness of "Benito Cereno" to maintain an "open margin" to the story and to react to the counter-texts inscribed in the margins. Most important, Melville's fictionalized documentary treatment of a slave revolt works toward offering a black voice that has been left out of the original story, that is, from the original account that Delano published in 1817. According to Robertson-Lorant, the deposition's "legalistic language obscures the moral issues and nullifies the African's point of view, as history written by the colonizers always does" (350). Even Melville's fictionalized deposition appears authoritative and impermeable to Delano. Its nuanced language and frequent interruptions demonstrate, however, that it is not an airtight document that reveals an unequivocal truth. The most striking language is the chorus that resounds in the margins: "This is known and believed because the negroes have said it" (749).

Melville limns a documentary aesthetic nearly 40 years before Stephen Crane and others do. First, he has his narrator, Amasa Delano, insist upon an open margin to Don Benito Cereno's "black-letter text." Next, his inclusion of a court deposition is a nod to the power of documents in shaping narrative. The open margin and the deposition are concerned with eruptive events or events with eruptive potential – the material of literature, in other words. Finally, Delano's commentary on the rebellion and the trial punctuates the lengthy deposition. This commentary constitutes his notes in the margins, a move on Melville's part that acknowledges competing versions of the same event and the possibility, if not the inevitability, of misreadings of that event.

If Delano is this unreliable with documents, are we all? I ask that my readers “leave an open margin” as they journey into barely-charted literary territory to explore the documentary aesthetic that informs American literature.

# Chapter One

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## Labors of Vision: Stephen Crane Documentary Flashes

“The logical end of impressionist art is the cinematograph.”

— Ezra Pound, “Vorticist Manifesto,” *Blast Magazine*

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new landscapes but in having new eyes.”

— Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way*

“They used to call me ‘that terrible, young radical,’ but now they are beginning to hem and haw and smile—those very old coons who used to adopt a condescending air toward me.”

— Stephen Crane, Letter to Lily Brandon Monroe, March-April, 1894

A powerful documentary impulse colors American popular culture and literary production at the turn of the twentieth century. Police reporter Jacob Riis responds to this impulse and advances it with his newspaper sketches, “Flashes from the Slums”; his books, *How the Other Half Lives* and *Children of the Poor*; and his magic lantern slide shows and lectures based on these works. His multi-media approach attracts and influences Stephen Crane, who integrates flashes and other technological developments into his highly visual, impressionistic writing style. In this chapter, I explore what I am calling Crane’s documentary aesthetic, which is particularly evident in his writing from 1894, a pivotal year in the development of both his subject matter and his style. Specifically, I analyze “In the Depths of a Coal Mine,” a piece of investigative journalism commissioned by *McClure’s Magazine*. More

generally, I explore the relationship of text to image at the turn of the twentieth century and analyze moments of image-creation.

Riis's influence on Crane is undeniable. Examining each author's relationship to photography elucidates this influence. According to Minter, "Photography began acquiring documentary authority in the nineteenth century, when the daguerreotype first appeared" (195). This early authority came by way of police work, such as the photographs taken for the Rogues' Gallery, which housed photographs of criminals and criminal "types" that served as prototypes for mug shots. By the late 1800s, another documentary purpose had been established: photographs could provide evidence that news stories were real. The first news photo appeared in the *New York Daily Graphic* in 1873 (Madison vii).

The technological development of flash (or flashlight) photography made possible Jacob Riis's social documentary photography in the 1880s and 1890s. The flash provided a sudden burst of light, which allowed photographs to be exposed in a fraction of a second instead of the several seconds or minutes that had been necessary before this development. This new technology enabled quicker work, and it also allowed photographers to capture more realistic, spontaneous moments. Riis achieved flashes by firing a revolver filled with magnesium cartridges (Yochelson 129), and the flame traveled the length of the flashbulb's fuse to create a burst of fire, the flash. (Woodbury's 1890 *Encyclopedia of Photography* explains the process of "blowing magnesium powder through a small flame" to create a flash.) Thus, Susan Sontag's forceful likening of camera to gun in her 1977 essay, "In Plato's Cave," proves a stunningly apt comparison, for roughly the same process was used in firing a gun and shooting a camera. Moreover, the same materials aided in police work and in police reporting.

In “Flashes from the Slums,” Riis’s column for the *New York Sun*, the reporter paints a vivid picture of “raiding parties,” his euphemism for episodes of guerrilla photography that he undertook to get stories:

Somnolent policemen on the street, denizens of the dives in their dens, tramps and bummers in their so-called lodgings, and all the wild and wonderful variety of the New York night life have in their turn marveled at and been frightened by the phenomenon. What they saw was three or four figures in the gloom, a ghostly tripod, some weird and uncanny movements, the blinding flash, and then they heard the patter of retreating footsteps, and the mysterious visitors were gone before they could collect their scattered thoughts and find out what it was all about.

The flash of a camera possesses a physicality, disorienting its animate subjects and rendering subjects wearing surprised, even stunned, expressions. A flashlight photo’s composition reflects this abrupt approach: “the instantaneous flashlight photographs...are virtually uncontrolled; the photographer entered a dark room and saw very little before the moment of exposure” (Yochelson 141-2). Thus, composition is secondary to the obtaining of evidence—in this case, evidence of poor living conditions. In addition to insight into his methods, Riis provides a telling description of the power dynamic involved in his investigations. He felt justified in bursting in on unfamiliar subjects, leaving without introducing himself or explaining his purpose, and using images of these subjects in stories for which he was paid. For Riis, photographs were means to an end, and he went to great lengths to achieve this end. For instance, in 1890, while photographing an apartment inhabited by five blind tenants, Riis set the walls on fire with his magnesium-flash apparatus (Riis,

*How* 30). The tenement neighborhood was called, appropriately enough, Blind Man's Alley. Riis writes, "With unpractised [sic] hands I managed to set fire to the house. When the blinding effect of the flash had passed away and I could see once more, I discovered that a lot of paper and rags that hung on the door were ablaze" (Riis, *How* 30). Riis goes on to describe his panic and confusion, and his eventual success in smothering the fire. He shrugs off the incident, however, once a neighborhood policeman laughs and informs Riis that fires are commonplace in that apartment due to its dirtiness. Riis then transforms this episode into proof that the city government and philanthropists should mandate more hygienic living conditions. He seems to see these invasions as necessary, for he admits that stories coupled with photographs make a greater impact. In his autobiography, *The Making of an American*, he states, "I wrote, but it seemed to make no impression" (172). His stories became more effective after he added images, in other words. What Riis does not seem to recognize is his own blindness to his hegemonic, invasive photographic practices.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Jackson discusses Riis's cultivation of "spiritual sight" through flashes that brought about religious experiences.

**Figure 1.1 – “Upstairs in Blind Man’s Alley”**  
Jacob Riis, from *How the Other Half Lives*



While reporting for the *Asbury Park Journal*, Crane saw Riis present a magic lantern lecture based on *How the Other Half Lives* and its sequel, *Children of the Poor*. This lecture exposed the squalid, disturbing living conditions of immigrants in the tenements of New York. In addition to covering housing problems, Riis's work discoursed on the attendant moral and social problems, especially those affecting

children, that he saw as plaguing the city. He toured with the agenda of advancing large-scale housing reform in New York City, and his trajectory of reform literature and presentations made him a celebrity. (He was friends with Teddy Roosevelt, as was Stephen Crane.) Riis's agenda developed from his Christian ideals and thus did not strike his middle-class, white, urban audiences as controversial or overtly political.<sup>2</sup> Though his shows became popular attractions, they had their critics, as Crane's coverage for the *Journal* indicates:

The thousands of summer visitors who have fled from the hot, stifling air of the cities to enjoy the cool sea breezes are not entirely forgetful of the unfortunates who have to stay in their crowded tenements. Jacob Riis, the author of *How the Other Half Lives* gave an illustrated lecture on the same subject in the beach auditorium on Wednesday evening. The proceeds were given to the tenement-house work of the King's Daughters. Over \$300 was cleared, which, at \$2 each, will give 150 children a two-weeks outing in the country. (qtd. in Stallman 56)

Crane's trademark ironic tone surfaces in his description of the vacationers and other spectators as "not entirely forgetful" of the conditions under which the poor live. Asbury Park was a seaside tourist destination for city dwellers, many of whom attended lectures and shows in addition to riding the amusement park rides and strolling the boardwalk that the town was known for. Indeed, these lectures constituted another form of amusement. The word "unfortunates," which connotes gentility, adds to this ironic treatment, for Crane eschewed gentility in his writing. Crane also takes a dim, sardonic view of the King's Daughters' (a religious

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<sup>2</sup> His message was conflicted, however. Keith Gandal characterizes Riis's reporting as "morally schizophrenic" (130).



organization) temporary solution to urban housing problems: provide a rural retreat for a handful of children. Moreover, his diction underlines his skepticism that this type of fundraiser accomplishes anything beyond assuaging the audience's guilt. In contrast to Riis's position, Crane asserts his guiding principle as follows: "Preaching is fatal to art in literature. I try to give readers a slice of life; and if there is any moral or lesson in it, I do not try to point it out" (*Correspondence* 73). This literary credo, as Crane scholars call it, sets him apart from Riis and other reformers. Crane challenges the reader to become an active participant, a reader-witness who must formulate her own conclusions. Crane aims to show people, events, and scenes in a way that engages all the senses. He is interested in showing what is there, not what he hopes will be there. In concert with this aim is Crane's reluctance to offer definitive statements or interpretations of these people, events, and scenes.

Crane recognizes the rhetoric of reform that fuels Riis's presentation. In a study of Riis's social documentary photography, Maren Stange asserts that Riis's magic lantern shows follow a distinct rhetorical formula, one that "connect[s] social photography, and the complex of attitudes Riis attached to it, to a traditional and familiar panoply of popular visual displays and diversions enjoyed by urban middle-class audiences" (2). In addition to laying a familiar foundation, these "displays and diversions" allow for the viewer's escape into a story or vicarious (and perhaps thrilling) descent into unfamiliar territory, often an underworld of squalor, mystery, or crime. Stange continues, "As [Riis's] lectures proceeded, slides were related to each other in pairs or groups for which Riis's remarks served as 'relay,' moving audiences along through story-telling sequences or images like those encountered in comic strips or films" (13). According to Bonnie Yochelson, "By the 1880s, lantern slide exhibitions, featuring travel, scientific, and religious topics, were a common form of genteel entertainment. They were held in schools, churches, and concert

halls for audiences who shunned vulgar melodramas and musical variety shows, although musical accompaniment was standard" (143-4).<sup>3</sup> Magic lantern shows were staged in darkness, with the only light being that given off by the lantern used for projecting the glass-plate slides.

The narration that bridged the images was both didactic and entertaining. Phillip Fisher explains,

Narrative Realism, the new photography as used, for example, by Jacob Riis in the slums of New York, the newspaper exposé – all had mastered the techniques of seizing attention by means of daring and shock and then sustaining attention by narratives that seemed to permit the public to educate itself about the realities of its own life and times.  
(158)

The move from shock to education entailed a process, one that relied upon a sequence of images and narration. Thus, the image captured an audience's attention, and the narrative provided the evidence necessary to persuade the audience to change its views or take action. The following photograph and excerpt from Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* illustrate this attention-seizing technique.

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<sup>3</sup> "Lantern slides were positive images printed on glass rather than paper and were viewed through a magic-lantern, or stereopticon, which projected images on a screen" (Yochelson 131).

**Figure 1.2 – “Ancient Lodger”**

Jacob Riis, from *How the Other Half Lives*



The caption for this photograph reads, “Ancient Lodger” (Riis, *How* 200). Taken “about 1890,” the photograph is useful for study because it displays the flash’s fuse and photographer’s hand. The photo seizes attention because the subject seems to be nearly dead. Moreover, the subject’s gender is uncertain, and this mystery would have likely disturbed the audience. The accompanying narrative begins with the provocative title, “The Wrecks and The Waste.” Riis’s photograph communicates the tragedy of the urban dispossessed: “The shadow of the workhouse points like a scornful finger toward its neighbor, the almshouse,” where “[r]ows of old women, some smoking stumpy, black claypipes, others knitting or idling, all grumbling, sit or stand under the trees that hedge in the almshouse, or limp about in the sunshine,

leaning on crutches or beanpole staffs" (201-202). Riis even suggests that part of what is tragic is that these women do not behave like women. The audience learns that the photograph is of a "pitiful" woman who costs taxpayers much. He concludes the essay with statistics, a maneuver that adds documentary veracity but also underscores the shock value.

Though Riis is credited for paving the way for similar documentary projects, particularly those of the Progressive Era and the 1930s, his influence can be felt – and traced – in literature as well. Crane and Riis both worked as journalists, and Crane's writing, both fiction and non-fiction, shares features with Riis's social documentary journalism. Though Crane eschewed overt reform projects, his writing reflects both Riis's uses of new technologies and the general documentary impulse evident at the turn of the twentieth century. Mary Esteve asserts, "At once a realist and journalist in New York, Crane is engaged in the hunting and gathering of social documents;... he participates in late nineteenth-century realism's dominant project of making urban topoi... sensibly and cognitively available to the newspaper and journal reading public" (103). The primary difference between Crane and Riis is that Crane invites ambiguity and interpretation, whereas Riis relies more on a sermon-like delivery whose message is explicit. Keith Gandal discusses the parallels between Riis's and Crane's work in his study, *Virtues of the Vicious*, claiming that both can be read in terms of "the decline of the nineteenth-century styles of sentimentalism and moralism and the rise of a modern aesthetic of excitement or spectacle" (10). Michael Robertson contends that Crane's newspaper writing "deserves to be studied on its own as literary journalism" that belongs to a "fact-fiction discourse" (5). He explains, "during the era of Joseph Pulitzer's new journalism, a fact-fiction discourse existed in much of U.S. journalism. Newspapers of the 1890s...indiscriminately mixed news, fiction, and feature articles that had an indeterminate truth status" (6). (Pulitzer

owned the *New York World*, in which Crane published numerous stories and sketches.) I contend that Crane's sketches for periodicals from 1894 deserve more critical attention so that scholars can attain a deeper understanding of the role of Crane's literary journalism in shaping a documentary aesthetic in American literature. One such sketch is "In the Depths of a Coal Mine."

## Impressions

Nearly two years after he reported on Riis's illustrated lecture, Crane and his friend, illustrator Corwin Knapp Linson, landed an assignment with *McClure's Magazine* to portray working conditions in the Dunmore Mine near Scranton, Pennsylvania, part of the nation's Coal Belt. Stanley Wertheim and Paul Sorrentino note that Crane and Linson toured the mines on May 18th and 19th, 1894 (108). *McClure's* was a newer, inexpensive magazine (10 cents an issue) that appealed broadly to a middle-class readership.<sup>4</sup> Crane biographer John Berryman called it an "energetic monthly" (88). Crane's and Linson's article and illustrations open the August 1894 issue, and their piece functions as an exposé of working conditions and displays a different ethos than the several other pieces on labor in this issue. For example, Crane's friend Robert Barr's "The Break-Up of the Soho Anarchist League" details the foiling of a group of young, would-be subversives. "The Mistress of the Foundry" tells of a woman who suppresses a labor strike while her husband, the owner, is away on business. Crane's and Linson's piece appears nine years before Ida Tarbell's articles earned the magazine a reputation for muckraking journalism, paints a bleak picture of the miners' wages and prospects, comments on the mining industry's irreparable scarring of the landscape, and cultivates sympathy for and interest in the miners. This sketch, while non-fiction, bears Crane's literary stamp

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<sup>4</sup>"McClure compensated for the low price of the magazine by relying on advertising revenue" (Hillstrom 120). This ushered in a major shift in U.S. journalism.

and reflects his penchant for experimentation, particularly in terms of the visual. Though thoroughly cited in Crane scholarship, “Coal Mine” has been treated only briefly and has not been analyzed for its inventive visuality.

In his autobiographical reflections on his friendship with Stephen Crane, Linson writes about their assignment for *McClure's*, a magazine with new purposes: “this bringing into literature the business of the times as McClure did it was new in the magazine world; interviews, science, human documents, nature, politics, everything; and writers made literature of it” (65).<sup>5</sup> The magazine’s purpose was to engage with real people and issues and to promote a realistic treatment of these. In her study on the influence of nineteenth-century periodicals on realism, Nancy Glazener posits that the *Atlantic* group, a coterie of magazines, shaped literary tastes in the late 1800s. At the forefront of this group, of course, was the *Atlantic Monthly*, edited by William Dean Howells. In opposition to the *Atlantic* group was the *McClure's* group, a cluster of less-expensive magazines that addressed middle-brow tastes. Howells’s ambivalent reactions to Crane’s work (he liked *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* but had reservations about the realism of *The Red Badge of Courage*) meant that Crane was on the margins of the *Atlantic* group, therefore publishing more frequently in the magazines of the *McClure's* group. Both magazine groups shaped “reading formations” (7) that reflected each group’s didactic aims. The *Atlantic* group possessed “cultural authority” (11), whereas the *McClure's* group provided a counter-current, which Crane helped to shape. This new wave of periodicals eventually supplanted the *Atlantic* group’s authority – and gentility – and became mainstream. Indeed, it was partly muckraking journalism that displaced the *Atlantic* group’s power. Glazener asserts that these magazines and their embrace of the “romantic revival” in literature displaces, or at least calls into question, “realism’s documentary

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah Orne Jewett contributed the first “Human Documents” segment to *McClure's* inaugural issue in 1893.

status" (250). I contend, however, that this turn to romanticism, which occurs in the 1890s and the first decade of the 1900s, is not at odds with a documentary status or impulse. Indeed, much realist literature from the late nineteenth century is best described as romantic realism, and it parallels the fact-fiction discourse in journalism. This conflicted brand of realism encompasses older plots, stock characters, and fantastical elements. It is not at odds with the strongly-felt documentary impulse at the turn of the twentieth century, however, for this impulse was also conflicted. Much of Crane's work belongs in the category "romantic realism."

Alongside the idea of reading formations, I place the idea of viewing formations. As representations shifted in the late nineteenth century, literature demanded viewing formations in addition to reading formations. Crane's writing occupies a liminal position between Realism and Modernism, shares characteristics with Impressionism and Imagism, and is contemporary with the inventions of flash photography and the cinematograph. This position renders his writing ideal for studying not only literary representations at the turn of the twentieth century but also for exploring the documentary impulse and the turn to visuality in American letters. Visual theorist Jonathan Crary distinguishes between visibility and visuality as follows:

Crary calls attention to the difference between 'visibility,' a theory and practice of representation modeled on the natural process of seeing, and what he calls 'visuality,' a theory and practice of imaging that visualized what could not have been seen without the help of certain technological advances, at least not by so many people and from the same perspective. (Armstrong 53)

The first component of Crane's visuality is Impressionism. This literary mode (which borrows from Impressionist painting) helps to bridge the gap between romance and realism, for it shows what is seen in the moment but acknowledges that any scene will be different in another moment or if rendered by a different writer or painter. I follow James Nagel's assertion that Impressionism is the most relevant technique with which to align Crane's writing, since his work deals so much with the play of light, offers perspectival, momentary representations of reality, and suggests near-constant motion. "Crane's understanding of his art...transcends the purely mimetic functions of slice-of-life Realism in favor of a representation of how things are 'seen'" (Nagel 19). Like Impressionist painters, Crane cultivates a style of representation that renders reality as we see it and lacks that carefully framed, reconstructive quality common in so much realist writing from the same period. According to Henry Bergson, "No American writer of fiction before the twentieth century forged a closer stylistic approximation of immediate sensory and perceptual experience than did Stephen Crane" (1). In line with William James's theories on consciousness, Crane records precepts before forming concepts and collapses the divide between subjective and objective experiences. For example, in "In the Depths of a Coal Mine," he delivers perceptions of the surroundings before formulating a stance on their meaning. Berryman insists that what Crane meant by realism was impressionism (55): "Impressionism was his faith. Impressionism, he said, was truth, and no man could be great who was not an impressionist, for greatness consisted in knowing truth" (Berryman 73).

My appraisal of Crane aligns his Impressionism with the aforementioned documentary impulse. Not only did Crane experiment with impressionistic visuality, he also applied this visuality to his depictions of slums and other seldom-treated subjects and characters, including coal miners, prostitutes, Bowery drifters,



soldiers, immigrants, and travelers, all characters formerly given little attention, much less visibility, in American literature – the figures that Mark Seltzer calls Crane’s “chancy persons, casualties, and cases” (5). How Crane represents these people and their circumstances and issues is as significant as his decision to write about them at all. Just as instantaneous flash photography and the magic lantern show function as steps on the path to the cinematograph, so, too, is Impressionism a step toward achieving more nuanced realism in literature. What can be seen, where, by whom, and in which moment are concerns at the heart of Crane’s writing. Thus, to return to Crary’s distinction between visibility and visuality, Crane bestows visibility by using Impressionistic visuality, which becomes a component of his documentary aesthetic.

An example of this visuality occurs in the opening of “In the Depths of a Coal Mine.” In his panorama of the coal mine, Crane characterizes the ““breakers”” (in quotation marks throughout the magazine sketch) as “enormous preying monsters” (195). The “breakers” are buildings for sorting coal. His description becomes more impressionistic as it continues:

The smoke from their nostrils had ravaged the air of coolness and fragrance. All that remained of vegetation looked dark, miserable, half-strangled. Along the summit line of the mountain a few unhappy trees were etched upon the clouds. Overhead stretched a sky of imperial blue, incredibly far away from the sombre land. (195)

The passage possesses an almost hypnotic tone, brought about by a series of similarly-constructed sentences, and it conveys an impression of a hopeless, despoiled landscape, one in which even the trees are “unhappy” and vegetation looks “half-strangled.” The fairly conventional language and imagery still manages

to deliver a punch, however. The last description arrests the reader's attention, as it offers the first hint of Crane's radical representations. The "imperial blue sky" evokes U.S. imperialism and suggests that the mine is a ruin of internal imperialism. That the sky is "incredibly far away from the sombre land" situates culpability for this ruined landscape with an indeterminate source or force. Moreover, this evocation of imperialism connects to Crane's use of the war motif and alerts the reader-witness that conflict lies beneath the surface.

## Flash!

Crane's stories are concerned with the nature of representation, its powers and limits. In order to bring his subjects to life—and to light—Crane incorporates the experience of flashes. Indeed, the flash is the hallmark of Crane's visuality.<sup>6</sup> Flashes occupy a prominent position in the American cultural imaginary. They spotlight phenomena and attractions. They are concentrated, momentary, and episodic. They connote brilliance and discovery and insight but also chaos and upheaval and eruption. We watch displays of pyrotechnics. We wait for geysers to spew. We learn of events through news flashes. Literary flashes abound as well. For example, a flash precedes Krook's spontaneous combustion in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*. Lehan's take on Dickens's use of flashes proves instructive here: "In Dickens's later novels there is a sense of the uncanny. Between the country and the city is a strange, eerie, primitive world of the marshes....The narrative flash points in Dickens's fiction occur where water and land meet, or where the country and the city intersect, or where the past and present verge" (39). Flashes occur in liminal spaces, in other words, much like the landscape and mine featured in Crane's magazine sketch. The *Oxford English Dictionary* for "flash" illuminates this conceit. A flash is "a burst of

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Seltzer's admirable reading of the influence of composite photography on Crane influences my reading of the place of flash photography in Crane's work.

flame; a flag in signaling; a brief telegraphic news dispatch; a flash-light photograph; a flash-lamp; and a patch of cloth on a military uniform" (*OED*). Each use of "flash" listed in this definition appears at least once in Crane's writings.

H.L. Mencken wrote that Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) entered the American literary scene "like a flash of lightning out of a clear winter sky." Not only was it striking, it also appeared unexpectedly and had the quality of being out of place, as would a lightning bolt in winter. Joseph Conrad remarked that *Red Badge* "detonated." These reactions, with their emphases on eruption, echo Crane's reliance upon flashes. Moreover, the eruptive appearances of Crane's fiction onto the literary scene parallel seismic social shifts, namely ones associated with immigration and labor "eruptions," at the turn of the twentieth century. The evaluations of *Red Badge*'s eruptive impact apply to Crane's other works. His 1894 sketches and stories for various periodicals display the same aesthetic. Though published in 1895, Crane's most famous work, *Red Badge*, employs many of the same motifs as "Coal Mine." (The phrase "new eyes," for example, which I discuss below, occurs three times in the novel. This overlap is due in part to the fact that Crane composed at least part of *Red Badge* before he wrote "Coal Mine.") This passage demonstrates the versatility of the flash: "As he gazed around him the youth felt a flash of astonishment at the blue, pure sky and the sun gleamings on the trees and fields. It was surprising that Nature had gone on tranquilly with her golden process in the midst of so much devilment" (31). How does one *feel* a flash? Crane suggests that his reader-witness can feel flashes as well and that this sensation induces involvement in the story. Such flashing occurs when Crane introduces the reader-witness to the miners:

Through occasional doors one could see the *flash* of whirring machinery. Men with wondrously blackened faces and garments came

forth from it. The sole glitter upon their persons was at their hats, where the little tin lamps were carried. They went stolidly along, some swinging lunch-pails carelessly; but the marks upon them of their forbidding and mystic calling fascinated *our new eyes* until they passed from sight. They were symbols of a grim, strange war that was being waged in the sunless depths of the earth. (195; italics added)

These are not ordinary men, according to Crane. Rather, they are men who carry their lunch-pails like ordinary men but who have answered a “forbidding and mystic calling.” This touch of exoticism reveals Crane’s awe of both the laborers’ physical power and their unfamiliar world. This description alerts the audience that in this strange new world, taken in only by fascinated (literally, under a spell) “new eyes,” one exists in perpetual suspense, for, not only is the mining culture foreign, but the earth is unpredictable. The “new eyes” also suggest wonder and naïveté. Moreover, Crane fuses men with machines when he states that the men came forth from “it,” which, in this context, is the “flash of whirring machinery.” Similar to the youth who feels a flash, these men originate in one. The word “stolidly” (one of Crane’s favorites) stands out as disparate in this passage, as it departs from the otherworldliness suggested in the other words. Finally, the word “depths” echoes the article’s title and underscores the importance of having underground scenes.

Crane’s motif of “new eyes” works both photographically, recalling Riis’s flashlight photography, and phenomenologically. In a treatment of the author’s city sketches from 1894, Alan Trachtenberg asserts,

He writes as a phenomenologist of the scene, intent on characterizing the consciousness of the place (which includes its separate points of view) by a rendering of felt detail....His *realism*, however, in the

phenomenological sense, points to the significance, indeed the radicalism, of these sketches. For Crane transforms a street scene, a passing sensation for which a cognitive mold is already prepared in his reader's eye, into a unique experience. (148)

Trachtenberg refers here to the paired, documentary-like sketches, "An Experiment in Misery" and "An Experiment in Luxury," that appeared a few weeks before Crane traveled to Pennsylvania. To complete these sketches, Crane went undercover to experience life in a flop-house and life in a mansion. Trachtenberg also discusses "When Man Falls, A Crowd Gathers," which details an urban scene involving a fallen man, and "When Everyone Is Panic-Stricken," which documents an apartment fire.<sup>7</sup>

Crane calls upon his readers to adopt these new eyes as well. As the philosopher Patrick K. Dooley notes, Crane's openness to experience places him in the company of pragmatic philosophers John Dewey, William James, and C.S. Peirce (187). Writing about this very passage, Dooley asserts, "Alert to the constitutive nature of contexts and consciousnesses, Crane maneuvers his readers into experiential contact with richness, novelty, and surprise as he has us confront a variety of versions of the same event" (187-88). This impulse catalyzes an aesthetic that presents a series of views for an audience and allows—or challenges—it to interpret these views.

Realizing the impossibility of photographing underground, Crane and Linson simulate flash photography. A photograph of Crane at the mines exists, but no photographs were made for the story. By traveling without a camera and relying on his verbal acuity, Crane sidesteps the pitfalls of imperialist photographic practices and is able to focus instead on the newness of the subject(s). The advantage of this

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<sup>7</sup> Trachtenberg reveals that "Panic-Stricken" is a fabricated story (149). Perhaps it serves as an illustration of the fact-fiction discourse.

approach lies in its avoidance of a formulaic representation of otherness. Moreover, in the absence of a camera, the flash becomes ekphrastic. Aware of the technique of flash photography and sensing its physical power and cultural significance, Crane incorporates it, whether consciously or not, into his writing and uses the flash to create impressions, bring about (flashes of) insight, reinforce his ever-present war motif, and make the reader-witness aware of her epistemological processes.

Additionally, though the sketch does not include photographs, Crane seems to recognize that mining provides the raw materials, such as magnesium and silver, necessary for the capturing of images for documentary photography.

**Figure 1.3 – “Stephen Crane at the Coal Mines”**  
Corwin Knapp Linson, from *My Stephen Crane*



### **Phantasmagoria, the Familiar Specter**

Crane and Linson use an innovative presentation style to reveal alarming facts about life in the mines. Crane's aesthetic of the flash borrows not only from flash photography but also from the magic lantern slide show. Thus, Riis is doubly influential. This magic lantern show unfolds in the pages of a popular magazine,

thereby reaching a middle-class reading public by way of a familiar amusement and narrative structure. Crane's and Linson's piece relies upon a close relationship between text and illustration that marks a new role for visual culture in popular entertainments at the turn of the twentieth century. Instead of presenting a matter-of-fact account of mining conditions, the collaborators render the experience with immediacy, taking readers on a tour of the mine and pausing to illuminate key images and episodes. The choice to simulate the magic lantern show was almost certainly deliberate, for Crane and Linson would have been familiar with this amusement and would have understood its appeal and its ability to reach a broad audience. Like *McClure's Magazine*, a magic lantern apparatus could be brought into the domestic sphere. Indeed, an appeal of the magic lantern show was that it could be either viewed in a theater or produced at home. It was fairly common for a middle-class family to own a magic lantern apparatus and experiment with special effects in the living room (During 73). Images thus invaded the middle-class domestic sphere. However, class privilege protected the readers of *McClure's* from being invaded in the way Riis's tenement dwellers were. I argue that, by deploying the magic-lantern technique to stage a tour of a representative coal mine, Crane both aestheticizes and politicizes representations of labor and laborers. His slide show elucidates the eruptive relationship between workers and U.S. imperialism at the turn of the twentieth century and adds to the narrative of labor history in America.

Seeing Crane's "Coal Mine" in relation to the magic lantern show helps also to account for the story's supernatural features. The magic lantern was also called the phantasmagoria, and a popular genre for shows was the ghost story (During 102): "Circulated by Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), the word 'phantasmagoria' became a widely accepted trope for a perceived loss of groundedness and reality in contemporary life" (During 102). The word "phantasmagoria" entered the English



language in 1802. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word as “an exhibition or display of optical effects and illusions.” Thus, Crane’s delivery works like an 1890s magic-lantern show *and* is influenced by the older form of the magic-lantern, the phantasmagoria. The latter style accounts for the ghostly, uncanny, making-strange elements in his presentation. These representations have the effect of displacing the reader-witness from a complacent view of labor and leading her to question current understandings of labor issues. Crane’s prose even feels eerie and unsettling. For example, he describes the miners as “snarling like wolves” (202), a representation both fantastical and seemingly inaccurate and unfair. (I explain below what Crane accomplishes with this representation and others like it.) According, again, to Simon During, magic lantern shows possessed both gothic features and pedagogical import (101). Crane’s magic lantern show helps him to illuminate a social issue with immediacy, while using a product of his time, a current form of visibility that he engages as a technology of documentary. Crane limns the phantasmagoric qualities and effects of the mine and miners in order to show how much of this world of labor remains invisible. In his attempt to render the mine and miners visible, it is also likely that he is commenting on the dormant political energy contained in the mine. Finally, this melding of documentary ethnography and phantasmagoric effects and entertainment allows Crane to politicize his aesthetic in a manner that is less overt or unsettling to his readers.

Crane describes how he and Linson have a tour guide and how their journey into the earth begins with an elevator ride: “There was an instant’s creak of machinery, and then the landscape, that had been framed for us by the doorposts of the shed, disappeared in a *flash*” (200; italics mine). Generally, things appear rather than disappear in a flash. After he has explained the darkness and foreignness of the mine, Crane delivers this sentence: “All at once, far ahead, shone a little blue flame,

blurred and difficult of location. It was a tiny, indefinite thing, like a wisp-light" (203). He sees the lights before he sees the miners. Continuing this impressionistic description, Crane remarks a few sentences later: "The tiny lamps in their hats made a *trembling light* that left weirdly shrouded the movements of their limbs and bodies" (203; italics added). He sees "limbs and bodies," but no distinguishing features. The lanterns and lamps set the miners in relief and imbue them with a phantasmagoric quality. These laborers appear spectrally, thereby recalling haunting stories of nineteenth-century labor unrest, episodes in which these very laborers may have participated. The men banter, and Crane records this in dialect, a choice that highlights one of the distinctive features of the miners but that also reveals their agency. He then introduces a disconcerting gothic element: "The *vague illumination* created all the effect of the snarling of two wolves" (204; italics added). This image is not only visual but is also monstrously auditory. Crane highlights the men's facial features, especially their eyes, with this description: "And at each place there was this same effect of strangely satanic smiles and *eyeballs wild and glittering in the pale glow of the lamps*" [in the "low-roofed chambers"] (204; italics added). Crane represents the miners as demonic, perhaps because of their close relationship to machines: "The *swift flashes of the steel-gleaming eyes* were upon our faces" (204; italics added). Throughout the tour, Crane employs the device of shocking the reader-witness before providing all the necessary information.

**Figure 1.4 – “The Main Gangway in a Coal Mine”**  
 Corwin Knapp Linson, from “In the Depths of a Coal Mine”



## Meet The Monstrators

Because Crane’s writing and Linson’s drawings feature episodes of mining life that suggest motion, scholarship on early cinema is useful as well. In particular, Tom Gunning’s theory of the cinema of attractions is applicable.<sup>8</sup> According to Gunning, cinema prior to 1906 is concerned with “visibility” and an “act of showing and exhibition” (8). Moreover, early cinema functions “less as a way of telling stories than as a way of presenting a series of views to an audience, fascinating because of

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<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to Bill Brown, who points out that the elevator ride in “Coal Mine” simulates the cinema of attractions. Whereas Brown reads the elevator ride as an amusement, I read the entire story as a series of episodes that suggest motion pictures.

their illusory power...and exoticism" (9). Also, "the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle—a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself" (Gunning 10). Crane is more intent upon showing than telling. I interpret "Coal Mine" as a series of attractions, and not, as Brown does, as attractions of the amusement park or game varieties. Crane realized that to attract an audience, he had to use attractions, and his simulation of the magic lantern show, which also hinges upon attractions, allows him to feature the "attractions" of coal mining culture and labor conditions in a manner both visually arresting and socially aware. (The attractions are more "exotic" than "illusory" in this case, though the phantasmagoric elements lend the story a haunting quality.) This technique reaches back to Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, VI, ii, 32, which describes the rhetorical device of *enargeia* as that which "makes us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene, while our emotions will be no less actively stirred than if we were present at the actual occurrence" (qtd. in Corbett 11). Viewers focus on one frame at a time rather than on a seamless story. Though this kind of focus was determined by the technology's limitations, it is also significant in terms of the reader-witness's reception of the entire sketch. The flashes startle the reader-witness and signal attractions, but they also constitute attractions themselves.

Crane becomes a figure in these attractions. As he enters the mine, the descent is dark, tumultuous, and scary, perhaps the most "forbidding" part of Crane's tour, which he re-creates for his audience: "The only thing was to await revelation" (200). About the guide, he writes, "His lamp *flared* shades of yellow and orange upon the walls of a tunnel that led away from the foot of the shaft. Little points of coal caught the light and shone like diamonds" (203; *italics mine*). Linson's sketch mirrors Crane's inventive visuality. He includes Crane in two illustrations because Crane is

the monstrator, a narrator who is also a demonstrator and thus part of the story. Like the man with the movie camera, Crane seems to be everywhere. Just as Crane frames the miners, so, too, does Linson frame Crane, thereby rendering Crane as somewhat of an insider, as well as an object of study for the reader-witness. Linson is trying to illustrate from all angles. Crane enters a subculture and its space and becomes part of it in order to get the story. In other words, he becomes both observer and participant. In one illustration, Crane holds onto an elevator cable and looks straight ahead. At odds with Crane's description, this illustration shows the elevator illuminated. In fact, Linson presents an impossible image, for he rode the elevator with Crane and would not have had the distance or perspective to have drawn this illustration. This invention is not anti-documentary, however, because its aim is comprehensiveness.

Linson's sketches render reality impressionistically, using concentrated images instead of broad strokes and making frequent use of a sfumato effect. Linson's style itself serves as an attraction. While no evidence can be found, Linson's drawings appear to be rendered in charcoal. If Linson used charcoal, it is an appropriate medium to represent the subject of mining. His style is by turns realistic and gothic, underscoring Crane's literary descriptions of the miners being drawn to a forbidding and mystic calling. Probing the surface of things is the aim of realism, and the underground setting of the coal mine enhances the visual and narrative arrangement of framing and monstration. When Crane and Linson cross the mine's threshold, they do not enter a well-defined space; rather, they enter unknown territory in which they are strangers. This subterranean space is crucial in delivering the magic lantern show, for Crane simulates not only a technique but an experience, one in which the reader enters a dark, mysterious space that is illuminated only sporadically. Moreover, the mine suggests the space of the theater in which a show would have

been housed. The mine and the theater are intimate and potentially dangerous spaces. People gather for a collective purpose—in the mine to work, in the theater to be entertained. The mine presents hazardous physical conditions, whereas the theater can expose audiences to new and perhaps controversial ideas—social fires, as it were. Crane's sketch, or cultural intervention, presents what he has witnessed and makes visible for the reading public a scene of labor that was formerly invisible. Linson's illustrations frame descent as well as dissent. The subject and locale were unknown to, and perhaps even unimagined by, most reader-witnesses. The labor itself possesses a phantasmagoric quality, for even in the sketch, the reader-witness does not see much of the work that produces the coal that powers industry and makes above-ground life more convenient. Crane's writing underscores a motif of unearthing: at the same time the miners are extracting coal, Crane is unearthing information about them and creating pen pictures (a term used to describe his 1898 war correspondence) of them. Stated simply, Crane and Linson mine for images.

**Figure 1.5 – “The Dead Black Walls Slipped Swiftly By”**  
 Corwin Knapp Linson, from “In the Depths of a Coal Mine”



### **Framing Attractions**

Stephen Crane scholar David Halliburton writes, “The nineteenth century is, to a singular degree, an age of detail” (16). The act of framing details becomes an integral component of Crane’s documentary aesthetic. Crane was better at framing a scene and conveying an image and an impression, sometimes a visual one and

sometimes one related to the other senses, than he was at crafting plot, so the magic lantern show is a fitting vehicle for his writing in “In the Depths of a Coal Mine.” Cars come out, and men shovel coal into chutes so that the “breaker boys” can sort it. Crane gives an overview of the workings of the coal mine, describing the machinery, then the small boys who work as slate-pickers – a difficult, painful job that pays little and almost inevitably leads to a life in the mines. Crane devotes space to the plight of child laborers, even giving them voice. He gives the boys’ wage: fifty-five cents a day. The word “breakers” denotes both the buildings in which machines for breaking coal were located and the machines themselves. Though the work of breaking coal was largely mechanized by the 1890s, it still required the use of swift, nimble child laborers, boys as young as seven or eight. Thus, this word and the monstrous imagery surrounding it draws the reader’s attention to the social issue of child labor and forwards a political aesthetic. “What else is broken?” Crane seems to ask.

What happens inside the frames, what happens outside them, and what happens in the spaces in between? The frames of the “breaker” are no simple affair: “upon its sides there was a profusion of windows appearing at strange and unexpected points” (195). Even when outside the mine, Crane emphasizes darkness, but a darkness punctuated by flashes of light. This passage also reiterates Crane’s visual disorientation. Another important feature of framing is that it draws attention to the margins and, by extension, voices from the margins. Indeed, the miners’ lamps give off the only light, a condition that suggests the miners’ agency, which Crane explores as the tour progresses.

The war motif is another type of frame. Progressive Era writers and reformers use this motif often. Indeed, Riis, who pre-dated the Progressive Era, claimed that the battle with poverty “looms larger than the Philippine policy of the nation” (*Battle*,



102). Crane never tires of the war motif, and he uses it variously. In *The Red Badge of Courage*, he creates the experiences that a young soldier, usually referred to as “the youth,” has. In *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* and his city sketches, he shows working-class and underclass denizens at war with the city and their harsh economic circumstances. In *The Monster*, he reveals a town embattled with a faceless black man. To write about coal mining inevitably involves writing about war, for the mining enterprise wages a battle with the earth that results in earth movements, ecological disasters and emergencies, and human casualties. Beyond these obvious connections to the battlefield motif, however, Crane includes generations-long labor disputes between miners and mine operators. Through the apertures he creates in his magic lantern show, Crane suggests imperialist economic wars that bring about social rifts and shifts. This is felt in Crane’s reference to the supervisor who thinks he controls the miners. Robert Morsberger notes that struggles between capitalist management and labor constituted “another civil war” in the U.S. and that “[a]mong the bloodiest battles were the coal mines” (156). He continues, “In literary chronology this war runs from *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861) to *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) (156).

Sounds constitute another framed attraction. Crane asserts that “the meaning” of the mine is found in the sounds that come from it. The sounds are the sounds of war, clashes and dins and creaks, but, more than this, they are the mine’s sounds of life and labor.

## **Labor Eruptions**

Labor disputes were a common feature of U.S. life in the economically straitened 1890s, and numerous newspaper and magazine articles covered working conditions and labor struggles in the Coal Belt, in which Scranton, Pennsylvania, was situated. Crane and Linson were in Scranton in May of 1894, close to the time of the Pullman

Strike of that year, which began on May 12 and ended on July 8 (Painter 123).

Hamlin Garland, who influenced Crane's attempt at investigative reporting, wrote an article on the Homestead Strike at Homestead, Pennsylvania, which he published in the June 1894 issue of *McClure's Magazine*. (In fact, Crane got the *McClure's* assignment on Garland's recommendation.) Crane's writing, aided by Linson's sketches, illuminates changing labor conditions at the end of the nineteenth century, a time when labor disputes and strikes had become commonplace but still aroused fear among members of the middle class and wealthy.

An oft-cited episode in Crane biographies highlights his interest in, but also his ambivalence toward, working-class labor and laborers. On August 21, 1892, a few weeks after Crane attended Riis's magic lantern show, Crane reported the America Day parade for the *Asbury Park Journal*:

The parade of the Junior Order of United American Mechanics here on Wednesday afternoon was a deeply impressive one to some persons. There were hundreds of members of the order, and they wound through the streets to the music of enough brass bands to make furious discords. It probably was the most awkward, ungainly, uncut and uncaring procession that ever raised clouds on sun-beaten streets...The procession was composed of men, bronzed, slope-shouldered, uncouth and begrimed with dust...They merely plodded along, not seeming quite to understand, stolid, unconcerned and, in a sense dignified—a pace and a bearing emblematic of their lives. (qtd. in Stallman 56)

Alongside his take on the Mechanics is a disdainful view of the citizens of Asbury Park, a place known for its amusements, such as the carousel: “Asbury Park creates nothing. It does not make; it merely amuses” (qtd. in Robertson 72). Crane's piece

celebrates the mechanics' impressive physicality and indifference to the affluent onlookers. At work in this description is a fascination with laborers that will persist throughout his career. Crane admires these laborers for their strength and their seeming indifference to bourgeois values. On the other hand, he conveys ambivalence when he describes the workers as dirty, as "begrimed with dust," and he seems uncomfortable with this visible marker of vocation. Despite its conflicted tone, the article on the parade signals a major theme in Crane's work: representations of the working-class laborer, often in conjunction with the motif of descent. These representations are a critical component of his article on the coal mine.

Crane's background reflects his fascination and ambivalence. In 1890, he enrolled in the mining-engineering program at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, a town near Allentown and Bethlehem, the heart of the steel industry — and 68 miles southeast of Scranton, Pennsylvania. By the time Crane's studies (which he did not finish) commenced, the industrial regions of Pennsylvania had been sites of economic and political turmoil for nearly two decades. One of the earliest and most famous — or infamous — labor disputes was the anthracite strike of 1877, a protracted struggle between the Molly Maguires (also known as the Ancient Order of Hibernians), an ostensibly secret society of Irish immigrant laborers, and mine operators and industry executives. The Mollies had waged guerrilla attacks on bosses for several years before being rooted out by a Pinkerton agent in 1877.<sup>9</sup> That same year, 20 Mollies were hanged for murder and acts of intimidation (Painter 15). Nell Irvin Painter notes, "Fear of working-class violence explains much of what has been called progressive reform" (xii). This labor uprising haunted the American

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<sup>9</sup> In the realm of popular literature, Allen Pinkerton, Scottish immigrant and founder of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, wrote *The Mollie Maguires and the Detectives*, an 1877 dime novel. In an early iteration of the based-on-a-true-story genre, this novel follows a detective who goes undercover as a miner, gains the Mollies' trust, and then exposes them to industry owners and bosses.

press and, by extension, the cultural imaginary, well into the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> Incendiary and fear-inducing newspaper reports on strife in the coal belt appeared fairly regularly during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The following news flash from the September 11, 1885 *New York Times* exemplifies this fear:

Molly Maguireism is again rampant in the upper and lower Luzerne districts. Nine murders have recently occurred in the northern coal fields, and mines are frequently fired. Murderers and firebugs go free, and the coal and iron police seem powerless to afford protection to life and property. The 'moonlight' rifle companies are drilling unmolested, and the association of miners and laborers is daily growing by hundreds. It is well known here that the Molly Maguire brotherhood has been quietly organizing since last April, and a general outbreak is confidently looked for before November. Detectives are watching for Socialist Gorsuch, of Chicago, who, it is thought, will try to organize a revolt among the miners. The familiar 'coffin notices' have been received by several members of the Law and Order Society.

The dramatic language in this news flash results in an ominous tone. Moreover, the report sounds as if it might have been garnered from rumors. According to Painter, "For the next few years, the Molly Maguires provided a symbol of senseless conflict, but they did not seem to threaten the country's basic stability" (15). This view of the Mollies may have led Crane to feel he could safely evoke their history in his article. When Crane writes about the eruptive potential in a Pennsylvania coal

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9 Martin Ritt's 1970 film, starring Richard Harris and Sean Connery, is a re-telling of this episode in mining history.

mine, he is also writing about the socially eruptive potential that populations such as the Molly Maguires have in the U.S. political and economic landscape. Morsberger describes how the depression of 1873 set off a series of violent conflicts in the Pennsylvania anthracite coal region and notes that many crimes were attributed to the Molly Maguires (156-57).

In “Coal Mine,” the mine becomes a site of cultural conflict and debate, and gets established as a site of cultural memory. Crane’s representations call forth older stories of labor uprisings. In other words, Crane subtly situates his foray into the mine in a historical context. According to Dooley, “Crane used art not propaganda to lay out his case” (192). Crane’s sketch is radical in that it is collaborative and self-reflexive and epistemologically uncertain. Its underground locale reinforces its radicalism.

Crane’s descriptions of the miners gives way to an episode of Linson trying to sketch a mule. Here, the gothic and the mechanical become entwined: “The men all laughed, and this laugh created the most astonishing and supernatural effect. In an *instant* the gloom was filled with luminous smiles. Shining forth all about us were eyes glittering as with cold blue flame” (204; italics added). Here, agency shifts from the documentarians to the miners. The miners light the way and articulate their own stories. They say, “‘He’s a good feller’” and hold the mule while Linson sketches (204).

**Figure 1.6 – “Whoa, Molly”**

Corwin Knapp Linson, from “In the Depths of a Coal Mine”



At another time, when my companion, struggling against difficulties, was trying to get a sketch of the mule, 'Molly Maguire,' a large group of miners gathered about us intent upon the pencil of the artist. 'Molly,' indifferent to the demands of art, changed her position after a moment and calmly settled into a new one. The men all laughed, and this laugh created the most astonishing and supernatural effect. In an instant the gloom was filled with luminous smiles. Shining forth all about us were eyes glittering as with cold blue flame. 'Whoa, Molly,' the men began to shout. Five or six of them clutched 'Molly' by her tail, her head, her legs. They were going to hold her motionless until the portrait was finished. "He's a good feller," they had said of the artist, and it would be a small thing to hold a mule for him. (204)

Crane's and Linson's representations of the miners can be explained in two ways. First is Crane's penchant for the theatrical, his tendency to stage scenes. As with any assessment of Crane's work, this one operates in tension with others. In other words, his desire to add a theatrical dimension seems opposed to his documentary impulse, his desire to capture the moment and to depict action as it unfolds. The other, not unrelated, explanation is that Crane's words and Linson's drawings reflect typical nineteenth-century portrayals of the Irish as demonic and nefarious. Maurice Collins and others write of the Irish as a racialized group that suffered from lack of economic opportunities (182). This explanation accounts for the miner in the background, behind the mule, who appears to be in blackface. His exaggerated features, the most prominent of which are thick, white lips, suggest not an African-American miner but a minstrel figure. Even more discordant is his singular presence. In fact, all of the miners would have been covered in coal dust. Though it would be easy to conclude that Crane and Linson dehumanize this miner, I

suggest that they juxtapose several versions of the miners' racial identities to alert readers to a diverse workforce. Furthermore, they politicize these figures. Other figures in the illustration reinforce this reading. The man wielding a whip or club and staring with gleaming eyes appears monstrous and sadistic. A man in front and to the left of the mule is unusually short, yet another distorted, almost grotesque figure.

Linson features Crane in the right foreground. This inclusion is significant, for it frames Crane as part of the story (a move from observer to quasi-participant), and it shows him writing, which suggests that he is, indeed, capturing the moment and that he is intent on his own form of manual labor. Crane's and Linson's collaboration of narration and slide upholds the magic lantern show's purposes of spotlighting an exotic scene while educating its audience. Indeed, Linson's image resembles a political cartoon, and Crane's representations call forth older stories of labor uprisings and of the Irish as low, sneaky, rough, and dangerous. However, Crane and Linson are not casting aspersions on the Irish; rather, they are using the tactic of shocking the reader-witness and calling attention to misrepresentations of racial and ethnic groups. In addition, this episode highlights the oppression of miners. Furthermore, this episode constitutes a radical representation in that Crane and Linson use familiar tropes to make visible a formerly unseen aspect of labor. Showcasing the ardors of mining accomplishes a greater awareness of the means of production.

In his autobiographical work, *My Stephen Crane*, Linson offers insight into the experience of capturing the mule:

I had difficulty with the shifting anatomy of the mule 'China' — not 'Molly Maguire' as printed (I am using his manuscript) — but several men seized the beast by the head, tail, and legs. 'Whoa! China!' ... In



reality it was quite in the way of being a diverting pastime, happening but once, maybe, in their whole experience. (68)

The command “Whoa! Molly!” calls for the halting of motion so that Linson can take a likeness of the mule, an act that would have required considerably more time than taking a photograph would have. Linson reveals that Crane made an editorial change in re-naming the mule “Molly.” I assert that Crane made this change in order to invoke the cultural memory of the Molly Maguires. This change constitutes yet another radical representation. This description of capturing subjects differs markedly from Riis’s story of setting an apartment on fire and points to the different effects that can be achieved when the documentarian has a relationship with the subjects. In a simile that summons the camera, Crane writes, “The glare made their eyes shine wondrously like lenses” (206).

The mule is named after the Molly Maguires, an organization of Irish miners that demanded better wages and treatment in the 1870s. Crane did this certainly in service of his critique of capitalism. Like so many laborers, mules are also in transition, from agrarian to industrial labor—displaced and occupying the margins of society. The mule is an icon of labor. The symbiosis of mules and men in mining, and in labor in general, receives much attention in American literature. Thus, the mules serve as powerful emblems of cultural change and even working-class solidarity. In this sketch, underground labor is connected to the underground workings of this organization.

Mines, because of their diverse workforces, provide fascinating studies of race. Matthew Frye Jacobson writes, “it is one of the compelling circumstances of American cultural history that an Irish immigrant in 1877 could be a despised Celt in Boston—a threat to the republic—and yet a solid member of The Order of Caucasians for the Extermination of the Chinamen in San Francisco, gallantly defending U.S.

shores from an invasion of 'Mongolians'" (5). And because mules represent mixture, Crane focuses on them as symbols of a shifting, more mixed workforce, i.e., immigrant and African American laborers. Crane uses the mule to expose labor conditions and injustices. He displaces these onto the mule, has the mule carry figuratively this burden. Crane's likening of mules to men constitutes a radical representation that allows readers to see laborers in a more nuanced way. Mules are also stubborn, unpredictable, and recalcitrant. That Linson has difficulty sketching the mule is a realistic detail of the story but also a symbolic one. It is difficult to capture an unfamiliar world or subculture, and it is also possible that the group under scrutiny is reluctant to reveal itself. "It was not until after we had grown familiar with the life and the traditions of the mines that we were capable of understanding the story told by these beasts standing in calm array, with spread legs," writes Crane (206). Crane even calls the mules "slaves" (206). Furthermore, he acknowledges that the documentary project involves understanding the inner workings of the mines. The mules used in the mines, and shown in Linson's sketches, function as living documents in that they are inscribed with cultural anxieties, including racial issues.

The mule "China" appears near the end of the story. The bodies of laborers are reflected in the mules. In fact, Crane uses the mules to bring out the most sensitive labor issues: the possibility of protest and upheaval, and the ill-used, trapped bodies in the mines. Crane depicts the mule "China," who has been forced to work in darkness for four years, as engaged in hidden labor. Given his appetite for current events, as well as his travels in the Western United States, Crane would have been aware of the presence of Chinese miners. In describing the mule "China," he calls to mind the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and its renewal a decade later.<sup>11</sup> Though this

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<sup>11</sup> Crane was accused in the popular press of being an opium addict, so he may have been sympathetic to the dominant culture's mistreatment and misunderstanding of Chinese immigrants.

connection may at first seem tenuous, a careful examination of the sketch's (and episode's) details demonstrates that immigration is one of the wars, or cultural debates, that this piece tackles. According to Berryman, "The self-possession of the mules he [Crane] admired, and spoke of their 'fantastic joy' when after years down pit they find themselves restored to light and air" (89).

**Figure 1.7 – “The official organ of Chinatown”**  
Jacob Riis, from *How the Other Half Lives*



Crane biographers maintain that the author was irate that his sketch had been edited. However, the objectionable passage hardly sounds the call for a worker uprising. The censored passage alludes to a tour of mine operators that occurred shortly before Crane's and Linson's visit. The mine operators were reportedly frightened by the dangers of mining, and Crane delights in this situation:

I confess to a dark and sinful glee at the description of their pangs; a delight at for once finding coal-brokers associated in hardship and danger with the coal-miner. It seemed to me a partial and obscure vengeance. And yet this is not to say that they were not all completely virtuous and immaculate coal-brokers! If all men who stand uselessly and for their own extraordinary profit between the miner and the consumer were annually doomed to a certain period of darkness and danger in the mines, they might at last comprehend the misery and bitterness of men who toil for existence at these hopelessly grim tasks. (qtd. in Stallman 112).

Crane advances a pro-worker sentiment, yet this critique of the coal-brokers is far from strident and even relies upon formulaic, romantic language ("vengeance," "darkness and danger," "hopelessly grim"). Thus, the change that Crane got by with — the addition of "Molly Maguire" — is a much more effective and radical statement.

Just as the miners have been illuminated in a flash, so, too, they disappear in one: "we had a moment in which to regard them" (209). In a return to the "forbidding, mystic calling" that Crane outlined at the beginning, he takes leave of the miners this way: "Then suddenly the study in black faces and crimson and orange lights vanished" (209). A few sentences later, Crane returns to the theme of newness: "I had forgotten about the new world that I was to behold in a

moment" (209). Again, he emphasizes the newness of this experience, one parceled out in moments, much like a magic lantern show. The newness reaches back to the "new eyes" that he adopts upon descending into the mine. Armed with new eyes in a new world, he sees that the old world has become new. The sketch's final flash is the "downpour of sunbeams," the hopeful radiance that greets Crane and Linson when they exit the mine.

### **Suggestions of Motion**

Documenting labor is an imperative of realism. Crane's writing involves the labors of subjects, writer, and reader-witness. Crane and Linson forge an aesthetic that is at once aligned with a contemporary artistic movement, Impressionism, and in support of a cultural impulse to document life as it happens. This documentary impressionism provides an opportunity for the reader-witness to understand the labor issues associated with coal mining. These acts of witnessing fit nicely with Crane's and Linson's attempts to render impressions through simulations of flash photography and the magic lantern show. Magic lantern shows provide impressions of places or peoples, not the definitive views. The mine also serves as a site of cultural memory, for it brings to mind the Molly Maguires and their fraught position in U.S. labor history and immigrant rights. Significantly, the impetus for documenting the mine is the Pullman Strike, which halted transportation or, more generally, motion.

In 1896, O. Winter described the cinematograph as "an endless series of partial impressions" (209). "Coal Mine" ends with silent movement, with the image of hidden coal cars "creaking up the incline" (209). According to Wiley Umphlett, "Prophetically, the visual intensity of Crane's writing style revealed a modernistic sense of movement within the boundaries of time and space, anticipating the shifting narrative focus of the movies, only a few years away from realization in the films of

D.W. Griffith" (30). Suspended between the magic lantern and the cinematograph, Crane reaches toward Ezra Pound's "logical end of impressionist art." The suggestion of early cinema fits nicely with Andre Gaudreault's claim that cinema at the turn of the twentieth century functions more as "a social, cultural, and artistic apparatus" than as a technological one (8). Thomas Edison's Vitascope and Black Maria Studio came on the scene in 1894 – and in Crane's home state of New Jersey, where he spent much time, and it is likely that he was familiar with these technological developments, particularly since amusements came quickly to Asbury Park, where he was a reporter. An 1896 Lumière brothers' film, *Carmaux, défournage du coke*, captures the outdoor workings of a coal mine. These early, slice-of-life films were called actualités. Though it is unclear whether Crane went to a showing the year after he published his sketches, the Lumières did travel to major world cities to show their actualités – the film's existence illustrates the significance of and fascination with mining, shows mines and miners to be captivating subjects, and underscores an impulse of writers, photographers, and filmmakers to make this labor and its conditions visible. In the film, whose running time is one minute, men stand with pick-axes, and coal-laden trains pass overhead.

Crane, stylistic barometer that he was, signaled a shift at the turn of the century that explains the linkage between documentary expression and eruptive moments. These moments resonate in narrative techniques that respond to seismic social and technological shifts. Thus, as a piece of proto-muckraking journalism, Crane's "Coal Mine" sketch is a testament to the powers of visual technologies in the work of the twinned enterprises of truth-telling and sensationalizing at the turn of the twentieth century. Though Crane did not subscribe to Riis's program of explicit social reform, he did tackle serious social issues in many of his writings, borrowing visual presentation techniques, if not reform rhetoric, from Riis and other social

documentarians, such as Riis's contemporary, Helen Campbell. Thus, "Coal Mine" is a more sophisticated and important journalistic work than critics have previously thought. Crane continued his documentary explorations, writing an account of "the Dora Clark affair" in which he championed a prostitute's rights in 1896,<sup>12</sup> and then writing an account of the sinking of the *Commodore*, an event that he experienced and that he also portrayed in one of his most famous short stories, "The Open Boat" (1897). Crane's nascent documentary aesthetic imprints American literature throughout the twentieth century, offering moments that anticipate 1930s documentary literature and influencing such devices as Dos Passos's "camera eye" in the newsreel sections of *The 42nd Parallel* (1930). More immediately, however, his aesthetic connects to the motif of the American eye that Charles W. Chesnutt grapples with in his 1901 novel, *The Marrow of Tradition*.

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<sup>12</sup> Because it embroiled Crane in legal controversy, the Dora Clark Affair ended Crane's friendship with Teddy Roosevelt.



**Figure 1.8 – “Drivers in a Coal Mine Co. Plenty boys driving and on tippie”**  
Lewis Wickes Hine, from Library of Congress



## Chapter Two

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### Charles W. Chesnutt's Documentary Eyes in *The Marrow of Tradition*

"What we can see depends heavily on what our culture has trained us to look for."

—Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People*

"Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof."

—*Othello*

"Images may fascinate but they also distract. Productive and interpretive power resides in words."

—Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality*

In 1998, citizens of Wilmington, North Carolina, commemorated the racial disturbance that occurred in their city 100 years earlier. In "Commemorating Wilmington's Racial Violence of 1898: From Individual to Collective Memory," Melton A. McLaurin touches on the debates in which the two main organizing groups engaged. A particularly fraught disagreement arose over what to call the event of 1898: "Some favored 'massacre,' others coup d'état,' still others 'race riot.' Each appellation carried political and racial connotations, and in the end the group agreed to use the term 'racial violence'" (47). Dividing the group was a color line, the very phenomenon Charles W. Chesnutt sought to write about and contest in his 1901 novel, *The Marrow of Tradition*, which takes the 1898 riot as its subject. I mention these details because Chesnutt encounters the same problem of naming the event in his novel. This problem plagues Chesnutt scholars as well. Wilson, for instance, calls

the event of November 10, 1898, a “coup d’etat/pogrom” instead of a riot (xi).

Because riot is generally the term used, I will use it throughout this chapter.

*Marrow* addresses the color line as it plays out in the national discourse on race. Indeed, the novel has long been read as the author’s commentary on *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896), the landmark court case that sanctioned the “separate-car rule” for African Americans traveling by train in the Southern states and reinforced Jim Crow segregation in the post-Reconstruction South. This ruling established visible blackness as the criterion for segregation. On a more local level, Chesnutt’s plot follows the newspaper editorials in white and African-American newspapers that led to the riot. Southern Democrats, anxious to return to power after losing to Republicans and seeing some African Americans appointed to civil service positions, ran a newspaper campaign that aroused fears about the crimes that “black brutes” were capable of committing, particularly against women. Specifically, the newspaper reacted to an editorial by Alexander Manly, an African-American journalist who claimed that not all sexual contact between black men and white women was nonconsensual. The white-supremacist reactions traded in stereotyped notions of African Americans as craven, untrustworthy, and dangerous. Underlying the rhetoric of these editorials is the fear that African Americans had gained a foothold in the town’s economy and politics and that it would be only a matter of time until they would “take over.”

*The Marrow of Tradition* confounds literary scholars. On the one hand, it is a realist text, concerned with testing the color line at the turn of the twentieth century. On the other hand, its plot is at times melodramatic, its characters mere types. Wilson calls for *Marrow*’s consideration as a historical novel: “Although the novel has been called ‘one of the most significant historical novels in American literature’ (qtd. in Sundquist vii), very little critical attention has been done on the

novel as a historical fiction" (100). Wilson and others categorize *Marrow* as a "historical romance" (xvi), following William Dean Howells's classification in his 1900 essay, "The New Historical Romances." This form arouses dissatisfaction in Howells. He explains his quarrel with what he sees as an anti-realist turn in American letters:

If I find the new historical romance wanting in these essentials of good fiction, what do I find in it?...One cannot see it fall below the highest aim of the great novelists without a pang; and this highest aim of the great novelists has always been to move the reader by what he must feel to be the truth. For the civilized man no representation of events can give pleasure, or fail to give pain, if it is false to his knowledge of himself and others. (940)

Howells reviewed *Marrow* negatively, stating that it was "bitter...bitter" about racial issues and that it was not a realist novel. This anti-realist label has dogged the novel for decades. Simmons's admirable recent book on Chesnut's realism argues against readings of the author as merely a writer of romances and asserts that Chesnut should, instead, be read as a writer whose concept of realism was broad enough to encompass what seem like romantic devices. A critical omission from Chesnut scholarship, however, is Simmons's and others' neglect of visuality in favor of narrative strategies. *Marrow* is, after all, a novel primarily about eyes, seeing, the "public view," the gaze, and witnessing. Thus, in this chapter, I focus on Chesnut's under-exposed visuality, offering a study of the "American eye," double exposure, the "eyes" of documents, and ocular dis-ease, and argue that this visuality constitutes a documentary aesthetic.

## The American Eye

First, I probe the concept of the American eye in order to better understand Chesnutt's intervention in the nineteenth-century discourse on race, particularly ways of seeing race and citizenship. To explain this intervention, I treat a series of questions. First, what *is* the American eye? Who gazes through it, and what happens when one does not (or cannot) gaze through this eye? What does the American eye see, and what can it not see, or what does it refuse to see? How closely entwined are seeing and American belonging? And, finally, how does the American eye function for the reader-witness? A loose concept, the American eye pertains to privileged acts of gazing. Chesnutt transforms the gazer into the witness. The exemplar passage of the "American eye" occurs early in the novel during a train journey that two doctors take from the North to the South and highlights ways of seeing race. If viewing these two men through the American eye, Chesnutt suggests, the focus would be on superficial differences rather than on profound similarities. Both men would be deemed "fine specimens" of nineteenth-century masculinity, yet the African American male would be at a disadvantage because of his "African blood," which, in the nineteenth-century cultural imaginary suggests savage proclivities and, by extension, dangers to the social order.

Instead of continuing earlier scholars' explorations of masculinity in the novel, I turn to a study of visibility. Because an extensive analysis will follow, the passage bears quoting in full:

A celebrated traveler, after many years in barbarous or savage lands, has said that among all varieties of mankind the similarities are vastly more important and *fundamental* than the differences. Looking at these two men with *the American eye*, the differences would perhaps be the more striking, or at least the more immediately apparent, for the first

was white and the second black, or, more correctly speaking, brown; *it* was even a light brown, but both his swarthy complexion and his curly hair revealed what has been described in the laws of some of our states as a “visible admixture” of African blood. Having disposed of this difference, and having observed that the white man was perhaps fifty years of age and the *other* not more than thirty, it may be said that they were both tall and sturdy, both well dressed, the white man with perhaps a little more distinction; both seemed from their faces and their manners to be men of culture and accustomed to the society of civilized people. They were both handsome men, the elder representing a fine type of Anglo-Saxon, as the term is used in speaking of our *composite* white population; while the *mulatto’s* erect form, broad shoulders, clear eyes, fine teeth, and pleasingly moulded features showed nowhere any sign of that degeneration which the pessimist so sadly maintains is the inevitable heritage of mixed races. (Chesnutt 49; italics mine)

McWilliams reads the “celebrated traveler” as the anthropologist Franz Boas, who claimed that “variations within a given race were much greater than the variations between one race and other races” (149). McWilliams’s reading of the “American eye” is persuasive. He contends that the word “visible” “must be read against “*American eye*” (149; italics in McWilliams). In this passage, the white man’s manners and dress receive attention, but the narrator emphasizes the mulatto’s physicality. The narrator is vague with the phrases “it may be said” and “our composite white population.” When Chesnutt’s narrator refers to the “composite white population,” he suggests the practice of composite photography, common in the late 1800s as a classificatory system. Francis Galton used the composite photograph to showcase what a white doctor, for example, looked like. The

photographs were also used to display criminal “types.” If people could be reduced to types, the logic went, society could be better understood and managed. In this passage, Burns functions as a composite photograph. In other words, he is easily classifiable as the typical white doctor. Miller, on the other hand, poses a challenge to Chesnutt’s white readership and to his narrator, for he embodies both races.

When the train reaches Virginia and the conductor moves Dr. Miller to the “colored car,” however, Miller’s thoughts echo those in the passage, revolving around ideas of manners and dress instead of skin color. Thus, the features noted in Dr. Burns’s appearance are reflected in Dr. Miller’s psyche. He sees himself as genteel, different from the “crowd” of African American farm workers that boards the train and makes Miller uncomfortable because of its boisterousness. The narrator’s and Dr. Miller’s “eyes,” or perspectives, yield fundamentally different visions of the scene on the train. Indeed, these visions are double-exposed in order to deconstruct the American eye. I highlight the word “fundamental” because I read it to mean radical. This word launches a discussion of Chesnutt’s radical representations. In this passage, he demonstrates how the American eye fails. He exposes the fallacies of monocular vision.

In the “American eye” passage, the narrator says, “having disposed of this difference.” Is it possible to dispose of the American eye? Does one dispose of it merely by labeling it? To echo Painter’s quote above, the labels we give things are not neutral. *The American eye* is specific, singular, connotative of monocular vision. The American eye assumes a false unity of perspective. According to Jacobson, “The American eye sees a certain person as black, for instance, whom Haitian or Brazilian eyes might see as white” (10). The “American eye” passage shows, in a highly visual, documentary-like way, the conditions in the white train car and then, immediately afterward, in the “colored” one. This shift quickly introduces the reader to two

perspectives on the American eye, each perspective framed by the train car, a confined space. Chesnutt advances a radical representation of nineteenth-century personhood by revealing more than one American eye. This passage foreshadows the novel's doubling of Dr. Miller, who represents gradualism and accommodation, and Josh Green, who represents revolutionary possibility.

A survey of the American eye's many literary precedents illustrates the vastness of its cultural reach. Indeed, it is surprising the frequency with which nineteenth-century authors employ the phrase. These writers often cast the "American eye" in terms of picturesque aesthetics. The word "picturesque" literally means "that which can be pictured" (*OED*). Many of these uses come from travel writing that employs picturesque aesthetics, which informed much writing by Americans in Europe in the nineteenth century. For example, both Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James write about scanning the London suburbs with the "American eye." Other nineteenth-century authors used the same conceit, nearly always drawing attention to a line of vision. The picturesque refers to a way of looking that emphasizes the broad and distant view. Indeed, even in Chesnutt's American eye passage, the narration places the reader-witness at a remove, as if to suggest that she is gazing from an undisclosed but privileged location. For example, she travels imaginatively from the train to "barbarous lands" to the American population as a whole—a bit of a travelogue. In picturesque aesthetics, the frame is paramount. In other words, this way of seeing depends upon nature's being contained and manageable, even if it sometimes maintains the *appearance* of wildness or wilderness. Jennifer Peterson points out that, at the turn of the twentieth century, the word "picturesque" applies not only to landscape but also describes the primitive or the destitute, "a quality of the native people who populate that landscape" (2). Citing eighteenth-century picturesque landscape theorist Uvedale Price's comments on the beauty of whiteness and the



monotony of blackness, Carrie Bramen argues that the picturesque was a racialized aesthetic: “The picturesque in its very origins uses the language of diversity to promote white supremacy” (452). William Dean Howells and Jacob Riis relied heavily on picturesque views and spectacles.

Another significant American eye in the novel is the piratical one, which Captain McBane possesses. Chesnutt mentions pirates and piracy several times, and, though these references seem like throw-away details, I read them as a significant component of his visuality. Chesnutt uses McBane, who has only one eye, as a caricature of the American eye. McBane holds a false title (“Captain”) from the Civil War and has worked during Reconstruction as a supervisor of convict labor, a job that recalls the role of a pirate captain. His one eye is “a single, deep-set gray eye” that is “shadowed by a beetling brow” (32). The narrator suggests that McBane lost one of his eyes in a brawl with an African American (83). This physical marker aligns him with piracy and connotes his violent proclivities. The diamond in the center of his tie mirrors his one eye, or it could serve as his second eye, corrupted by his violence toward African Americans and his shameless pursuit of wealth: this “solitaire diamond blazed...like the headlight of a locomotive” (53). Even McBane’s cigar, which he lights in the “colored car” during the same trip mentioned above, foreshadows Chesnutt’s references to Blackbeard, the pirate who inspired terror along the North Carolina coast by lighting ropes in his beard on fire. Just as Blackbeard’s beard served as a veil or disguise, so, too, does McBane’s false title protect him with a social disguise. Because of his limited vision, McBane is a compromised witness of the changes occurring in the American and Southern racial landscapes. Piracy is antithetical to citizenship, and Chesnutt uses this motif to highlight the factors in place that prevent full citizenship to African Americans. Chesnutt’s piracy motif extends to landscape as well. Though Chesnutt focuses little

upon landscape, when he does, it is to describe the old Delamere plantation. This plantation borders the coast and is reputed to have been one of Blackbeard's landing places in the eighteenth century. This juxtaposition likens plantation culture to piracy, as each relies upon an undisturbed, hegemonic American eye.

Another iteration of the American eye occurs through Major Carteret's point of view.

Only this very morning, while passing the city hall, on his way to the office, he had seen the steps of that noble building disfigured by a fringe of job-hunting negroes, for all the world – to use a local simile – like a string of buzzards sitting on a rail, awaiting their opportunity to batten upon the helpless corpse of a moribund city. (Chesnutt 30-31)

Chesnutt's mention of the courthouse recalls the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* ruling and thus serves as a direct reminder of the political power of documents. This moment compels the character, Major Philip Carteret, the editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, to write an editorial on "the unfitness of the negro to participate in government" (30). Witnessing this gathering of African Americans reinforces the major's already strong convictions. The tableau of the disenfranchised is a staple in Wellington (Chesnutt's fictional name for Wilmington), a place where social and economic conditions are remarkably unwell. According to Carteret, the presence of African Americans on the courthouse steps renders the steps "disfigured." This is an early indication of the sickness in Wellington, though the major's take on the causes of the sickness is different from the African Americans'. The word "fringe" refers to a margin in a frame or to the border of the frame itself. It suggests what the American eye can take in and perhaps points to the limitations of that way of seeing. The "local simile" makes the reader-witness aware that Carteret looks down on vernacular speech and

separates himself from the working-class point of view suggested by such a simile. “Like a string of buzzards” continues the grotesque imagery that begins with the word “disfigured.” Buzzards are scavengers, and Carteret sees these disfranchised former slaves and children of slaves as scavengers, people who do not deserve to participate fully in society, who do not deserve to be citizens. Thus with the word “opportunity,” used ironically here – after all, few opportunities exist for these marginalized citizens. (Chesnutt ironizes the word “opportunity” and echoes it in the word “opportune” in the “American eye” passage.) That Carteret already sees the city as a “helpless corpse” suggests the heightened fears of a post-Reconstruction white supremacist. Finally, the description of Wellington as “a moribund city” is echoed near the end of the novel when Chesnutt deems the city a “melancholy witness” (310). Both descriptions set up the city as a character that can see and be seen.

Chesnutt skillfully offers one perspective on the American eye at a time. If Carteret uses his newspaper to arouse the white public’s fear of African Americans, Old Mr. Delamere embodies a more paternalistic attitude toward race relations. When Sandy, Mr. Delamere’s faithful retainer, is accused of murdering Polly Ochiltree, an old dame of the Wellington aristocracy, Chesnutt’s narrator describes Mr. Delamere’s reaction to Sandy’s probable lynching: “White men...howling like red Indians around a human being slowly roasting at the stake” (Chesnutt 211). Suddenly, the narrative contains a Native American presence, albeit a negative one.<sup>13</sup> Though the simile is obvious, it is important that Chesnutt uses something that *does not* happen in the story order to describe something that *does*. In other words, real racial tensions are rendered through an eruptive, racialized imagining in which an inversion of racial identities occurs. Notice, for example, that the race of “a human

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<sup>13</sup> I am researching Chesnutt’s Lumbee Indian ancestry, which could lead to this novel’s being read as a tri-racial treatment of race.

being” is unspecified, and this vagueness allows the reader to reflect on two stories at once: the main plot about racial tension and violence in Wellington/ Wilmington, North Carolina, and the larger, parallel story of shifting racial identities at the turn of the twentieth century. During this moment, which occurs inside of Mr. Delamere’s indignant speech, the reader-witness is lifted out of the narrative so that the narrator can evoke older, analogous stories about marginalized, “primitive” racial groups. This moment’s movement also revolves around an aural eruption, for sound – the “howling” – propels the image. This imagery recalls the “barbarous lands” description in the American eye passage. This racialized simile refers to Sandy’s close call with lynching. It is only “a *slight* change in the point of view” (read: American eye) that saves Sandy from being lynched (232; italics mine).

## Double Exposure

The two doctors on the train present two reflections of the American eye but also constitute an instance of double exposure. Indeed, Chesnutt’s narrative operates through a pattern of double exposure. Borrowing from photographic double exposure, this technique becomes Chesnutt’s documentary tool for spotlighting and critiquing social, racial, and economic issues at the turn of the twentieth century. Moreover, this narrative double exposure interrogates the trope of the “American eye,” which Chesnutt uses to highlight multiple points of view, particularly as they pertain to the discourse of race, and particularly as this discourse is channeled through documents.

Noticing the motif of doubling is nothing new in Chesnutt scholarship. Wilson comments upon Chesnutt’s “complex double vision” that sets characters in opposition to reveal two sides to the same issue (117). This phrase comes from Ralph Ellison’s essay, “The World and the Jug,” that describes “the uneasy burden and occasional joy of a complex double vision, a fluid, ambivalent response to men and

events which represents, at its finest, a profoundly civilized adjustment to the cost of being human in this modern world" (131-32). Ellison's use of "ambivalent" is key here, for it connotes not a noncommittal attitude but the ability to see both sides of "men and events" simultaneously. Chesnutt's double exposures charge the reader-witness with the responsibility of interpreting the images and narratives that compose racial discourse.

Double exposure plays out in the novel's detective plot, which composes one of several threads. (The others are the planning of a coup d'état; the love triangle of Clara, Tom, and Ellis; and the various illnesses that befall the Carteret baby, who must be protected at all costs.) Ronald Thomas writes convincingly of the role that double exposure plays in the detective plots in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* and Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*. Likening the portrait to the mug shot and the photographer to the detective, Thomas notes that the detective plots benefit from the juxtaposition of painted and photographed portraits, with the latter serving as legal evidence (89-90). As Thomas points out, "the photograph is a representation of a thing in need of interpretation. It is not the thing itself" (100). Chesnutt's quasi-detective plot revolves around the murder of Polly Ochiltree. The eruptive, flash-like moment when Old Mr. Delamere realizes that his grandson, Tom, is the murderer constitutes an instance of double exposure. Delamere enters Tom's bedroom, his eye drawn to Tom's pornography, denoted by "a number of photographs and paper-covered books" (222). Chesnutt likens Tom's weakness of character to his criminality. Notably, Delamere sees the pornographic materials before he sees the burnt cork that gives away Tom's means of impersonating Sandy at a cakewalk, an act that leads the townspeople to blame Sandy for Polly's murder.

Other scholarship on doubling has centered on the doubling of characters, not on the doubling of images. Still other work has looked at how novelists incorporate

Du Bois's notion of double-consciousness. In photography, double-exposure is a process that exposes two images on the same glass plate (in Chesnutt's time). These photographs were popular in the 1890s and were often featured in sensational exhibits that emphasized special effects and trickery. Double exposure is a powerful visual tool that Chesnutt evokes subtly and skillfully to illuminate issues of racial identity and belonging. Narrative double exposure juxtaposes two storylines and allows these to operate simultaneously while heightening the tensions between the two.

The sensational spectacle occurs during the cakewalk sequence when Tom imitates Sandy. Double exposure unsettles the American eye, and this quality of American visuality being in flux allows different perspectives to enter the picture. For example, Chesnutt shows his readers various African American perspectives on race and citizenship. The plot is structured by intense doubling. The birth of one child and the death of another frame the plot. The geographical poles of North and South structure it as well. The two newspapers, one for a white audience, the other for the African-American community, set the color line in relief. My analysis acknowledges the frequent doubling that Chesnutt employs (and that has been much discussed), but it goes beyond that observation to discuss doubling in terms of double exposure—in terms of *seeing* as well as *being*, in other words. Examples of doubling include Tom Delamere, the aristocrat, and Sandy, the Delamere family's servant; Olivia Carteret and her half-sister, Janet Miller; and Dr. William Miller and Josh Green.

Because of its use in photographic trickery, the technique of double exposure is connected to questions of truth and reality. I am less interested in the trickery effect than in the way that double exposure allows other stories or views to enter the main frame. One literary allusion that Chesnutt draws upon is that of Robert Louis

Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Chesnutt uses this to liken Dr. Miller to Dr. Jekyll and Josh Green to Mr. Hyde. As seen in Figure 2.1, this photograph uses double exposure to display one actor in both roles.

**Figure 2.1 – “Richard Mansfield as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”**  
Pach Brothers, from Library of Congress



Yet another instance of double exposure occurs when Carteret finds in his wastebasket an advertisement for a product that will straighten “kinky” hair. In that same newspaper is an article by an African American activist who promotes equality. In this moment, advertisements and politics become inextricably entwined. Jerry Letlow, Carteret’s servant, comes in to the newspaper office with an altered appearance because he has used bleaching products on his skin and straightening products on his hair in hopes of appearing whiter. He has seen these products advertised in the *Afro-American Banner* (Chesnutt 244). Jerry thus becomes a double exposure of himself and, to reach back to the American eye passage, embodies racial admixture. According to Major Carteret, Jerry’s offense is partly that he has *read* about, or at least *seen*, these products in the *Afro-American Banner*. Carteret interprets Jerry’s reading of this document as a betrayal. In keeping with his role as submissive racial other, Jerry colors his skin dark with “printer’s ink,” thereby embodying the very document, the newspaper, that his employer uses to intimidate African Americans.

## The Documents

Chesnutt’s descriptions of seeing and witnessing coincide with eruptive moments that center on a variety of documents. The first of these documents is the implicit presence of *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, but others include more local documents, such as editorials and handbills, and more personal ones, such as wills and letters. Chesnutt, educated as a lawyer, worked as a courtroom stenographer, a preparer of legal documents, so he was aware of the potency of documents, legal and otherwise (Pickens x). He was even concerned about the influence that filmic representations could have on people’s attitudes and behaviors. In fact, he wrote two letters to the Cleveland, Ohio, Chamber of Commerce to protest screenings of D.W. Griffith’s 1915 *Birth of a Nation* (based on Thomas Dixon’s novel, *The Clansman*), stating that



showing a character who is both a “colored” Army officer and a rapist would be detrimental to the morale and national loyalty of black citizens and viewers. Chesnutt asserts that the film “as a work of pictorial art is a superb and impressive thing, and all the more vicious for that reason” (qtd. in Pickens 24). It is significant that some viewers of this film interpreted it as real rather than fictional, and Chesnutt seems here to credit and be wary of that interpretation. Chesnutt’s attention to *Birth of a Nation* suggests that he is interested in the cultural and political power of visuality and the documentary uses to which visual technologies can be put. What is also interesting here is Chesnutt’s implicit concern for the doubling motif: the character in the film is both citizen and criminal and thus possesses both conformist and revolutionary potential.

Chesnutt is not the only author who wrote about the events of November, 1898. David Bryant Fulton, who wrote under the pseudonym of Jack Thorne, published what many consider the only documentary novel of the disturbances in Wilmington. *Hanover: Or the Persecution of the Lowly, A Story of the Wilmington Massacre* appeared in 1901, the same year that *Marrow* was published. In the 1969 Introduction to the novel, Thomas Cripps asserts, “The virtue of Fulton’s novella was that it set out to recount black resistance” (v). Fulton explains his documentary novel as follows: “‘This little volume Hanover is the outpouring of a heart full of love for the people of my race. In it I have attempted to relate the injustices done them in the year ’98 at Wil.[mington] N.C. This is the work of one who was reared in Wil. and therefore knows...the victims of mob fury’” (qtd. in Cripps v). This episodic novel offers multiple accounts. The chapter “Mrs. Adelaide Peterson’s Narrative” offers one such perspective. Written as a letter from New Bedford, Massachusetts, it begins, “Dear Jack Thorne: In compliance with your request for a narrative of what I witnessed of the massacre which took place in Wilmington, N.C., in November 1898, I herewith

write for the information of the world what happened in the section of the city known as Dry Pond" (92). Unlike Chesnutt, who removes himself from the narrative except for a handful of times when he seems to address the reader-witness, Thorne inserts himself into the narrative throughout, thereby giving it an "I was there" quality. Mrs. Adelaide Peterson's letter serves as documentary evidence that names existing persons and places.

Robert Coles suggests that *Marrow* can be read as a documentary novel (265). What does Chesnutt gain by using documents, especially private ones, and making these as important as public ones? How are documents doubly exposed, or what do they doubly expose? How does the American eye inform documents? The novel explores the ways that socially-constructed vision distorts documents in terms of truths and purposes. Ernestine Pickens asserts that Chesnutt played a part in the Progressive Movement and that part of his work involved letter-writing campaigns (such as the one mentioned above) that addressed injustices against and misrepresentations of African Americans. This connection strengthens my assertions that Chesnutt believed in the potential of documents to effect social and political change and that, therefore, this novel possesses documentary significance.

The characters in *Marrow* manipulate documents. One example is the handbill announcing Sandy's innocence. Once Ellis and Old Mr. Delamere realize that Tom Delamere murdered Polly Ochiltree, they go to the *Morning Chronicle* office and reveal the truth to Major Carteret, who wishes not to publicize it, as the news will harm the work he and his cronies have done to promote white supremacy. A meeting is called, and the "important" citizens of Wellington/ Wilmington decide to call off the lynching and protect Sandy. To do so, they call in "the crack independent military of the city" (231) and print a handbill at Delamere's request. This document

calls off the lynching but does not issue a new investigation. Indeed, the case never comes up again, and the “real facts” never surface (112).

The editorials in Major Carteret’s *Morning Chronicle* are also manipulated for political ends: “All over the United States the Associated Press had flashed the report [of the murder of a white woman by a “black brute”]” (Chesnutt 233). The Associated Press news flash about black brutality shows that the issue is national as well as local (223). The editorial in the *Afro-American Banner* that Carteret reacts to is by a man named Barber (based on Alexander Manly). Barber the writer hearkens back to Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” which, in turn, highlights the black barber as a professional, liberated, and literate figure. Thus, this re-naming constitutes a radical representation on Chesnutt’s part in that he suggests Carteret’s fear of Barber’s rightness, intelligence, and citizenship.

*Marrow* distinguishes between those citizens who can be considered “documented,” i.e., white professionals, and those whose citizenship status is marginal or non-existent. One incident of the latter occurs when Dr. Miller drives to the Delamere Plantation to try to save Sandy from being lynched. As he and Ellis, the Quaker reporter who works for Major Carteret, leave the city, they encounter toll collectors, destitute figures on the margins of Wellington/ Wilmington. Another example of the undocumented occurs when Dr. Miller is driving through town during the riot to find his wife and child: “Then there flashed into his mind Josh Green’s story of his ‘silly’ mother, who for twenty years had walked the earth as a child, as the result of one night’s terror, and his heart sank within him” (Chesnutt 294). This calls to mind the trauma that Josh Green and his mother, Milly, suffered when they witnessed McBane murder Josh’s father 20 years ago. The murder occurred when Ku Klux Klan members invaded the Green household. No records document this event, and Josh and his mother have no legal recourse. As Dr. Miller

drives through town, he realizes that the riot will result in similar casualties, which will likely be undocumented.

Olivia Carteret, the Major's wife, fears that the truth of her relationship to Dr. Miller's wife, Janet, will be revealed: "Suppose that, with the fatuity which generally leads human beings to keep compromising documents, her aunt had preserved these papers?" (177). After her aunt, Polly Ochiltree, is murdered, Olivia finds the documents, "written on legal paper," that prove that her father had married an African-American woman and that she is legally related to Janet. A separate document, her father's will, leaves a substantial amount of money and property to Janet. This plot thread demonstrates the tropes of discovering the crucial document and then burning the crucial document. Olivia reacts so strongly to these documents that she throws them into the fire. The words do not disappear immediately, however: "the carbon residue of one sheet [of the will] still retained its form, and she could read the words on the charred portion" (Chesnutt 258). This palimpsest echoes double-exposure moments in the story. Then, after she realizes that she has treated Janet illegally and poorly, Olivia has to take to her bed for several days. While recovering, she allows herself to recognize that slavery was "wrong" (258). Her reading of the documents results in a powerful ocular dis-ease, one that plagues other citizens of Wilmington as well as the city itself.

### **Ocular Dis-ease**

After Dodie Carteret, the son of Major Philip and Janet Carteret, is born, his nurse, Mammy Jane, spots a mole behind his ear that she interprets as a bad omen. Dodie's fragile life is often threatened, first during his mother's difficult labor, then when a piece of a baby rattle obstructs his windpipe, and then when he falls out of a window. After his fall, the narrator articulates Mammy Jane's opinion: "If its malign influence might for a time seem to disappear, it was merely lying dormant, like the

germs of some deadly disease, awaiting its opportunity to strike at an unguarded spot" (Chesnutt 105). This dis-ease is aligned with the visual – in this case a visible mark on the body. Dodie's near-misses with death symbolize the tenuous position of his father's white supremacy.

Chesnutt links many instances of visibility to what I am calling ocular dis-ease. Near the end of the novel, during the riot, the narrator reveals Captain McBane's bloodthirstiness: "He had had no opportunity, at least no tenable excuse, to kill or maim a negro since the termination of his contract with the state for convicts, and this occasion [the riot] had awakened a dormant appetite for these diversions" (304). What follows is a strange authorial intrusion in which Chesnutt displaces his narrator to deliver social and moral commentary: "In works of fiction, such men are sometimes converted. More often, in real life, they do not change their natures until they are converted into dust" (304). This is a documentary moment that is enhanced by visibility, i.e., "converted into dust." Moreover, the authorial interruption creates a double-voiced moment, yet another instance of narrative double exposure. Furthermore, the authorial intrusion increases rather than diminishes the reader-witness's ocular dis-ease.

In *Marrow*, General Belmont proclaims, "[T]his is the age of crowds, and we must have the crowd with us" (81). Despite his prejudices, the general often serves as a mouthpiece for sensitive issues in the novel. His statement not only speaks to the increasing urbanization of the U.S. at the turn of the twentieth century, it also declares an undercurrent of ocular dis-ease that accompanies these rapidly forming and dispersing crowds. This dis-ease is a condition of not knowing the validity or reliability of perspectives and representations that come about in a crowd. Furthermore, one member of a crowd may not know the other members, even though they have assembled for a purpose, however fleeting. What happens to

seeing and witnessing in a crowd? According to Esteve, “the aesthetic relation by the beholder to the crowd is more akin to the sublime than the beautiful in that the crowd takes on qualities of startlingly powerful nature, through its inanimacy, impersonality, and size” (16-17). The sublimity creates greater ocular dis-ease than the beautiful. Chesnutt highlights spectacles in these crowds. “The negroes seemed to have been killed, as the band plays in circus parades, at the street intersections, where the example would be most effective” (Chesnutt 287). The “seemed to” indicates that the African Americans could have been killed elsewhere but then placed at the intersections so that more people would see them. It is a double exposure as well, of riot and circus, that leads the reader-witness to imaginatively juxtapose the images of both. The dis-ease culminates in the following description: “Spontaneously the white mob flocked toward the hospital, where the rumor had it that a large body of desperate negroes, breathing threats of blood and fire, had taken a determined stand” (Chesnutt 299; italics mine).

### **A Radical American Eye**

Simmons writes that Wellington’s white citizens “are rioting in response to a *document* that acts merely as a mirror, one that relates nothing more nor less than the truth of their own actions” (103; italics mine). The riot/ coup d’etat/ pogrom does not destroy the city hall, the place the reader-witness associates with Major Carteret and the place where legal documents are housed, but the African-American hospital, the place dedicated to healing diseases: “The hospital lay smouldering in ruins, a melancholy witness” (Chesnutt 310). Thus, Chesnutt suggests that the dis-ease, ocular and otherwise, will continue to plague the city. The hospital itself serves as a witness and recalls the “American eye.” The reader-witness is left with a feeling of uneasiness as well. “The riots had subsided; even the glow from the smouldering hospital was no longer *visible*. It seemed that the city, appalled at the tragedy, had

suddenly awakened to a sense of its own crime (Chesnutt 315; italics mine). This eerie lack of visibility at the end causes the reader-witness to wonder whose American eye will prevail. The American eye is a device Chesnutt draws from in order to illuminate seismic social shifts. Chesnutt creates narrative clashes and eruptive viscosity to force the reader-witness to see. In this novel, the eye has shifted to eyewitness. Chesnutt has radicalized vision and documents.

In *The Marrow of Tradition*, his novel treating Southern race relations and issues of United States citizenship and belonging at the turn of the twentieth century, Charles W. Chesnutt interrogates the conceit of the American eye and deploys the visually and narratively eruptive device of double exposure to draw attention to acts of seeing and witnessing and modes of racialized representation. Specifically, he adjusts the lens of the American eye in order to incorporate multiplicity. In his essay, “The White and the Black,” which appeared in the March 20th, 1901 *Boston Evening Transcript*, Chesnutt writes of the outmigration that occurred after the events of November, 1898: “in the town of Wilmington, N.C., since the ‘revolution,’ as the white people call it, or the ‘massacre,’ according to the Negroes – it was really both – over fifteen hundred of the best colored citizens have left the town” (58). It would be 100 years until the city could commemorate its troubled past.

**Figure 2.2—“Composite photograph of child laborers made from cotton mill children”**  
Lewis Wickes Hine, from Library of Congress





## Chapter Three

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### “Always the Teller’s Tale”: Lee Smith’s Documentary Frames

“A frame is fundamental.”

—Eudora Welty

“If there is a place where this is the language may / It be my country.”

—W.S. Merwin, *The Lice* 46

“You will read what I have written, but will not take up your pen, as the material is not the stuff of history. You have only yourself to blame if it seems not even proper stuff for a letter.”

—Pliny the Younger, “Letter of Pliny the Younger on the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius,” 79 A.D.

Lee Smith’s fiction abounds with documents and illustrates that the American literary obsession with documents and the impulse to document persist into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Smith, a native of Grundy, Virginia, belongs firmly in the canon of Appalachian literature, whose authors include James Still, Harriet Arnow, Gurney Norman, Fred Chappell, Denise Giardina, Breece D’J Pancake, and Nikki Giovanni. These writers attend to themes specific to the region: the emotional and cultural power of bluegrass and country music; the shift from subsistence agriculture to employment in mining and logging industries at the end of the nineteenth century; the issue of outmigration that resulted from high unemployment in the mid-twentieth century and led to many Appalachian natives settling in large cities, usually Cincinnati and Detroit; and the poverty resulting from absentee land ownership, a condition that allows corporations to extract resources

and profit without paying taxes to benefit these places. In addition to treating these issues, Appalachian writers tackle widely-accepted, often negative notions about the region's people. These notions include seeing the region as primitive, violent, and ignorant. One of the stereotypes that Smith combats is that of the illiterate, backward hillbilly. Many of the works in this grouping interrogate and dismantle stereotypes and ask reader-witnesses to analyze their frames of reference, frames that are often formed in relation to inaccurate representations from popular culture. A powerful example is the 1972 film *Deliverance*, which stages tense, violent encounters between Atlanta businessmen and the supposedly primitive, inbred natives of the north Georgia mountains.

Smith belongs also with a group of writers associated with the New South. These include Bobbie Ann Mason, Jill McCorkle, Jayne Anne Phillips, Clyde Edgerton, Randall Kenan, and Barry Hannah. These writers, born in the 1940s and later, examine the move from a rural to an urban South. Moreover, they question the concept of a monolithic South, forwarding instead the notion that there exist many Souths—the Deep South, the Coastal South, the Piedmont South, the Mountain South, the Mid-South, and, of course, Atlanta—each with its own distinctive characteristics and populations. These writers also consider what it means to identify as a Southerner, particularly in light of the region's—or regions'—part in the nation's racist history.

Smith's literary ancestors deserve mention as well. Dorothy Hill compares Smith to both Eudora Welty and William Faulkner. Smith's borrowings from and re-writings of myth are traits she shares with Welty. Hill distinguishes between the two writers' projects as follows: "Welty gives the reader snapshot truths of times and places. Smith's concerns are both broader and narrower" (126). Each writer's concerns and themes are reflected in storytelling methods. Before publishing her first

short stories in 1941's *A Curtain of Green*, Welty worked as a photographer in Mississippi. Indeed, Welty was an ardent documentarian of Depression-era Mississippi, contributing scores of images, often of African Americans. Her approach differed from the styles of well-known Depression-era photographers, such as Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Arthur Rothstein, and her photographs have only recently been studied.

Departing from Welty's snapshot aesthetic, Smith relies upon the written document before the photograph, the panoramic view rather than the snapshot. She shares with Welty a penchant for structuring her stories with frames. In Smith's fiction, frames beget frames. Much of her fiction revolves around a character's collection of documents or springs from Smith's own participation in documentary projects or grows out of happenstance encounters with documents. Smith's 1982 novel, *Oral History*, put Smith on the national literary map, but her 1987 novel, *Fair and Tender Ladies*, garnered much more attention and praise from both critics and readers. Hill reveals, "The seed for the novel (*Fair and Tender Ladies*) was sown when Smith bought a packet of letters for 75 cents at a garage sale and found them to contain a woman's whole life in letters written to her sister" (14). In this novel, protagonist Ivy Rowe begins corresponding with a German pen pal because of a class assignment. Once she marries and leaves her home, she writes letters to her sister, Silvaney, even after Silvaney dies and the letters cease having a recipient. Ivy's life spans most of the twentieth century, and her letters chronicle not only feelings and personal developments but also changes to southwest Virginia in terms of labor, landscape, and family relations. Smith's regional focus has come at a price, however. Hill notes that, in 1983, "The *New Yorker* had once written her that it would like to publish her if only she would write about a different class of people" (13).

Hill asserts, "It is Faulkner who can most correctly be called Smith's southern progenitor. All her females can be seen as Caddy's daughters" (129). Both Faulkner and Smith claim geographic corners as their own literary territory. For Faulkner, it is the imaginary Yoknapatawpha in northern Mississippi; for Smith, it is the rural Mountain South, especially the place in southwest Virginia where she was raised. Both writers explore family relationships. Faulkner, however, writes of a decaying aristocracy and of Deep South sensibilities and creates female characters who do not become actualized. Smith writes from the perspectives of female characters seeking voice and empowerment, and she allows them to achieve these things. Smith's most popular novel, *The Last Girls* (2002), centers on women who attended college together and whose daring raft trip down the Mississippi River is chronicled in late-1960s newspaper articles, which Smith weaves, along with letters, into the narrative. The novel takes place when most of the women reunite for another trip down the Mississippi, this one less physically risky but more emotionally charged.

Smith questions implicitly how documentary endeavors both change and preserve their subjects, whether individuals or cultures. Documenting a person, culture, place, or phenomenon alters it. In a 1983 interview, Smith, in a storytelling manner, had the following to say about the "institutionalization of the past":

I feel that no matter how much you record people and so on, you never really know exactly the way it was. I particularly love things like the *Foxfire* books...But I'm also endlessly fascinated by the idea that it is always the teller's tale, that no matter who's telling the story, it is always the teller's tale, and you never *finally* know exactly the way it was. I guess I see some sort of central mystery at the center of the past, of any past, that you can't, no matter what a good attempt you make at understanding how it was, you never can quite get at. But I think

institutionalizing the past needs to be done. Things need to be preserved insofar as they can be" (qtd. in Arnold 5-6).

As Granny Younger, the first storyteller in *Oral History*, says, "Well, they is stories and stories" (50). Through this character, Smith preserves Appalachian folkways. She also lays a foundation for nuanced rather than narrow histories, multiple voices instead of one, women's voices over men's. McDonald explains, "One reason so many Southern fans identify with Lee Smith is that she tells a story in the same convoluted way that they themselves do, using intimate asides, gossipy digressions, and personal references, just as a friend would tell a story in ordinary conversation" (184). Smith's documents possess a conversational tone, and this tone makes both the documents and the characters they represent accessible to the reader-witness. Smith also includes many highly literate native characters and highlights different kinds of specialized literacy, such as Granny Younger's knowledge of herbal remedies and her syncretic blend of "witchcraft" and Christianity.

As connected to the tradition of literature from the Mountain South as Smith is, she has also made a unique contribution to contemporary fiction by forging a documentary aesthetic. Though she has been writing fiction for over 40 years and has been a popular writer for over 25 years, her work has received relatively little scholarly attention. Most scholarship on Smith focuses on her portrayals of women or the strong sense of place in her fiction. This chapter, however, examines her portrayals of women and place in light of her documentary aesthetic. Even a cursory look at Smith's storytelling techniques arouses curiosity about her reliance upon documents. Her aesthetic consists of the following characteristics: multiple voices—with women's voices privileged and radical; documents that often possess a confessional tone, as if telling the story through the document is the only way the character or storyteller can tell it; rapid, even urgent, revelations; varied, minutely

detailed documents, including letters, journals, diaries, court depositions, ballads and other songs, and school assignments; emphasis upon the concrete and sensory; an “aural realism” (Lowenstein 113) accomplished through dialect and music; an ekphrastic visuality; and a challenge to the ethnographic gaze. Unlike Denise Giardina’s writing, Smith’s fiction does not possess an overt political aesthetic.<sup>14</sup> Her documentary aesthetic does, however, address the politics of representation. Her protagonists, lonely girls or women who love to read and possess keen imaginations, engage in independent, and sometimes unconventional, explorations of their worlds. These explorations involve record-keeping or other kinds of documentation. Most notable is their need to give voice to experience, to tell of what has happened to them, to plumb their subjectivities. Smith’s stories bring together past and present, spanning several generations, typically from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth. The stories are region-specific, usually set in southern Appalachia, a region difficult to map but generally understood to include southwest Virginia, West Virginia, northeast Tennessee, eastern Kentucky, western North Carolina, and northern Georgia.

This chapter examines two novels that possess a documentary aesthetic: *Oral History* and *On Agate Hill*. In *Oral History* (1983), Jennifer undertakes an oral history project for a college course in hopes of impressing her professor. Smith’s latest novel, *On Agate Hill* (2006), finds restaurant hostess Tuscany Miller sorting through a collection of nineteenth-century documents and sending these to a former professor in hopes of leveraging re-admission to a college program. Further linking these novels is Smith’s method of telling stories *through* documents. As she uses this storytelling technique, she reveals her characters’ documentary methods, exploring how these characters make sense of and record their lives and charting how they see

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<sup>14</sup> Giardina is author of the admirable *Storming Heaven* and *The Unquiet Earth*, both of which deal with coal mining in West Virginia and Kentucky. She cites Smith as an influence.

themselves in relation to history. Smith's documentary approach raises several questions. What storytelling power does she achieve by including documents and telling stories through them? What does she accomplish with documents that she could not accomplish without them? Do they change fundamentally the stories she is telling? Is the documentary aesthetic particularly suited to regional literature, or literature about region, or is it universally relevant? Finally, what is Smith's fiction's relationship to postmodernism?

### **Issues of Representation in *Oral History***

*Oral History* took shape in the early 1980s after Smith had recorded stories and had amassed boxes of material from her home region. In addition to her taped recordings, she conducted meticulous research.<sup>15</sup> *Oral History* begins with Jennifer, the protagonist in the documentary frame that Smith establishes, interviewing relatives in Hoot Owl Holler in southwest Virginia. Jennifer is collecting stories from the rural relatives that she has neglected and shunned and of whom she has been taught to feel ashamed. She has grown up in a town and has been economically comfortable. Her relatives, on the other hand, have struggled financially, though they are now on the way to becoming middle class. As part of her college assignment, Jennifer records her "Impressions" of the mountain "folk" and their surroundings. She writes,

The picturesque old homeplace sits so high on the hill that it leaves one with the aftertaste of judgment in his or her mouth. Looking out from its porch, one sees the panorama of the whole valley spread out like a picture, with all its varied terrain (garden, pasture, etc.) stitched

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<sup>15</sup> In every novel, she provides her sources so that readers can undertake further research.

together by split-oak fences resembling nothing so much as a green-hued quilt. (18)

Jennifer's description, written in old-fashioned, somewhat stilted prose, showcases an unpracticed ethnographer's voice. She relies upon worn-out, sentimental symbols, such as the "picturesque" vista and the "green-hued quilt." Smith's use of the word "picturesque" harkens back to Nathaniel Hawthorne's touristic gaze and the limited perspective of the "American eye." Jennifer turns from landscape to people to claim, "One feels that the true benefits of this trip may derive not from what is recorded or not recorded...but from my new knowledge of my heritage and a new appreciation of these colorful, interesting folk. My *roots* (19; italics in original). Jennifer relies upon an us/ them divide and maintains a safe psychological distance from her subjects throughout her one-day visit, which, after all, is brief for a project of this scope. She sees herself as "modern" and sees her relatives as "simple" and "primitive." Indeed, even the word "roots" connotes Jennifer's sense that these relatives are beneath her and usually unseen. After writing her "Impressions," which she conflates with "knowledge," she expects (or perhaps hopes) to return to her relatives' modern home (a ranch-style house built in addition to the mountaintop cabin) to find them doing wholesome, earnest chores. What she finds, however, is discordant with her hilltop imaginings: Almarine is carpeting his van, his wife is painting her and her daughter's nails, and the boys are watching *Dallas* on television. Jennifer had expected these more picturesque, "primitive" relatives to be frozen in time, somehow untainted by modern conveniences and concerns. Despite evidence that contradicts her hilltop imaginings, the latter will win out in her project, and the reader-witness senses that Jennifer's professor and fellow students will accept her limited and limiting version of life in Hoot Owl Holler. Smith makes Jennifer's



innocence comical, but it has greater significance in the novel's plot, for it makes the reader-witness aware of the dangers of innocence.

Jennifer's voice possesses less liveliness and earthiness than her relatives'. Smith's dialect-laden prose creates an aural realism that contributes to her documentary aesthetic. For example, Granny Younger refers to "a little set-along child," a designation for a child out of the crib but not yet walking. Smith preserves many such idioms, though many more have been lost. Through the character of Little Luther Wade, who is always singing, Smith preserves folk songs. In the 1930s, W.P.A. cultural workers come to record him singing and playing guitar. Smith illustrates that Little Luther, though never trained in music, is a true artist. A more potent example of aural realism occurs in another scene featuring Little Luther, this one from the 1920s. Families have gathered for a hog-killing. Smith details the gutting of the hogs and the making of sausage. In addition to providing food for the winter, the hog-killing also creates a festive social atmosphere and depends upon the execution of rituals. Couples meet, children play, and old women are allowed to give orders and enjoy the spectacle. Young males participate in the killing as a rite of passage. Jink Cantrell is one such boy. He is sensitive and interested in learning, and he is reluctant to take a knife to the hog's belly. When he does, the crowd of adult males lauds him and begins singing lewd songs, with which he learns to sing along. Little Luther sings about the "ring-a-ding-a-doo," a euphemism for female genitalia. Jink recognizes the song as crude, but he joins in because he realizes he has to in order to fit in with his community. Smith's details about the method of killing hogs; the songs sung at ritualized, seasonal gatherings; and the role that each member of the community plays make this episode one of the strongest documentary parts of *Oral History*. Yet another documentary aspect of aural realism exists in Jink's speech. He has been attending school and enjoying it. When the reader-witness hears Jink

speak or think to himself, she hears him speak first with regional speech patterns intact. Cognizant of his formal schooling and of the teacher's voice that he has internalized, Jink immediately corrects himself. ("It don't" becomes "It doesn't.") His is one of the most compelling and endearing voices in the novel. Indeed, Jink possesses the voice the reader-witness wishes Jennifer had.

Jennifer's encounter with these supposed cultural others in Hoot Owl Holler highlights a major plot device in Smith's fiction: the stranger-comes-to-town motif and the conflicts between insiders and outsiders that ensue. Smith uses this motif to even greater effect with Richard Burlage, a character who travels to the region in 1923 (50 years before Jennifer) to teach. Burlage communicates with the reader-witness through his journal, "Richard Burlage: His Journal, Fall 1923," written in a lofty prose. He and Jennifer are the only characters who do not tell stories orally. As Richard begins his journey from Richmond to Hoot Owl Holler, he reveals that he sees himself as a pilgrim on a mission to save the mountain children from their ignorance and backwardness.

Smith's characters often imagine their lives being framed as paintings, photographs, or moving pictures, and Richard's descriptions are highly visual. An example is his description of the train car: "The interior light was so dim that I doubted my eyes; it was as if this whole encounter were taking place in a badly-made moving picture" (Smith, *Oral History* 105). This comparison underscores the "unreality" of his experience that derives from his lack of frames of reference. He can only manage to describe his first impression in terms of manufactured things. Then, a few moments later, "It was a town resembling a stage set for a motion picture: plank sidewalks, badly paved road, horses and mule teams tied up along the way, although some automobiles were parked, too, in front of the buildings" (109). Like Jennifer, he grudgingly admits the modern touch that the cars provide. Throughout

his document, however, Richard sees and describes what he expects and wants to see.

Though Richard does not want to admit that modern conveniences and features, such as cars and movies, play a role in this remote place, they do continue to serve as touchstones for him. First, the movies enter into his imaginings. After beginning an ill-fated romance with Jink's half-sister, a young woman named Dory, he writes, "I try to imagine taking Dory to a picture show, walking along a sidewalk with her,...yet she seems to exist for me only in that shadowy setting — ..." (148). He cannot imagine bringing her into his reality, the world of his wealthy, Richmond, Virginia, family. To do so would mean traveling by train, and the train means something different to Richard than it does to Dory. Trains occupy an important position in writing, music, photography, and other art generated in the rural mountain South. Trains symbolize change, invasion, mystery. Whereas a train is what liberates Richard from Hoot Owl Holler and restores his life to order, a train is the agent of death — first psychological, then physical — for Dory. After Richard leaves in 1924, Dory spends hours walking in a trance alongside the train tracks that run through the coal camp where she lives. One day in the 1930s, she places her head on the tracks and waits for a train to run over it. Smith delivers this death scene cinematically.

A cinematic visuality is at work in Smith's rural characters' descriptions as well. In Granny Younger's section, the wise midwife and healer says, "Sometimes I see the future coming out like a picture show, acrost the trail ahead" (36). What might seem an anachronistic comparison actually illustrates that the mountain culture was not as isolated as some outsiders, such as Richard, assumed. It is the early twentieth century, and Granny Younger is familiar with the medium of the picture show, and uses her familiarity to craft a skillful, prescient simile. However, just because Granny draws this comparison does not mean that she sees the "picture show" as a positive,

or even a neutral, entity. This comparison illustrates that Granny Younger is a matriarchal figure who senses that her importance is diminishing as her community members seek knowledge and healing elsewhere, perhaps even from picture shows. She does not seem to be included in the “picture show” that she envisions. Granny Younger’s comparison presages the arrival of Richard Burlage, an outsider who alters, irreversibly and irresponsibly, the life of Dory Cantrell, whose voice the reader-witness never hears directly. Richard relies often upon the mediated image to render his experiences and emotions, for he, restricted by bourgeois upbringing and sensibilities and by formal education, is uncomfortable with raw emotion and untutored behavior. Dory, on the other hand, represents the natural world. Thus, Richard and Dory represent conflicting world views and epistemologies. This difference plays out in Richard’s unwillingness to accept what Dory tells him about the curse that haunts her insular family. He sees removing her from the holler as the only way to preserve their relationship and promises to take her back to Richmond with him; instead, he is run out of town before his teaching contract expires.

Richard’s place in the novel is both tragic and comic. He never quite grasps the psychological damage to Dory that his actions have wrought. Yet Smith does portray him realistically and not unsympathetically. Like all of us, he is driven by complicated, jumbled motives. He is also young and uncertain of his identity and his place in society. Richard serves another important role in the novel in that his presence coincides with corporate control (railroads, mining companies) of the land and the shift from subsistence agrarianism to labor in coal mining and logging, labors that effected profound, and often negative, changes to family and community relationships in the Mountain South. He reveals, sometimes unwittingly, all these dynamics in his journal. Smith’s purposeful juxtaposition of Richard and corporate

infiltration both highlights and questions the insider/ outsider binary. This binary inevitably arises in most documentary work.

Richard chronicles his first foray into the mountain South in his journal, which documents his impressions, feelings, and experiences. Smith uses these personal writings to show him at a nascent stage of doing documentary work and to highlight concerns and issues that arise when he attempts to represent others from a different background. (Smith implies that these issues apply to anyone attempting documentary work.) Richard's experiences are not universal – indeed, Smith lampoons his efforts – but they are common enough to merit recording and commentary. When Richard returns to Hoot Owl Holler in 1934 to photograph the place he lived for a few months in 1923, he imagines that he travels incognito, though his former landlady quickly discerns his identity. Smith describes Richard's disguise of hat and dark glasses comically while also illustrating that he cannot escape himself. When the section begins, he is driving to the coal camp, located where his school in Hoot Owl Holler used to be. He sees himself in the rearview mirror and reflects upon his ostensible purpose: "For I wished – foolish notion – to capture a bit of the past" (217). Both sentimentality and the desire for fame and money motivate his trip.

In this section, he shifts from viewing the mountain "folk" as if they existed in a moving picture to trying to capture still images of them. One miner even mistakes him for a W.P.A. photographer, a mistake that Richard capitalizes on, for it gives him entry to the coal camp. Richard's appropriation of a W.P.A. worker's identity is ironic, for he documents from a place of self-interestedness, not out of a sense of social or moral responsibility. Nor is he in need of a W.P.A. job. This section reads like his journal from 1923, but the title, "Richard Burlage Discourses Upon the Circumstances Concerning His Collection of Appalachian Photographs, 1934,"

suggests that it was intended for public perusal. His audience concerns account for his wordy but also somewhat glib tone, especially as he describes his photograph titled, "Whore House, c. Hard Times." This photograph features Justine Poole's, his former landlady, dilapidated boarding house and two dimly-outlined prostitutes behind curtained windows. To Richard, this is a detail both picturesque and thrilling. He is slumming, after all.

Smith uses Richard's photography to epitomize the pitfalls of documentary work, particularly those involving power differences. Richard's work takes on a quality of documentary colonialism that trades in misrepresentations. For example, he takes a photograph of a group of boys about whom he says, "for these fellows were nothing if not picturesque" (217). He takes photographs in the manner of Jacob Riis, staging a fight among the boys because he feels that will capture their hardscrabble existence and their essence. (Riis photographed "street Arabs" fighting, though these scenes were actually staged and reenacted.) And Richard finds what he is looking for. Like the coal companies extracting coal, Richard extracts images that give him capital, but this is cultural capital. His experience of this corner of the mountain South is aesthetic, not political or ethical, not even fully real.

Smith has Richard write catalogues of his photographs (218-19) in meticulous detail. His catalogues enhance his documentary purpose, for they both explain his project and its images and reveal his biases and his agenda, common factors in documentary endeavors. The following example evokes and pays homage to Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, perhaps the most iconic photograph from the Depression:

—A young mother sitting patiently on the curb waiting for somebody as if she has all day or perhaps all month to wait, which perhaps she has, a filthy squirming barefoot baby on her lap, her plaid dress torn at

the armpit, her eyes huge and dark and tubercular and staring straight into the camera, her lips parted slightly as if to utter something she cannot articulate, something which I feel I captured, nonetheless, in this photograph. (219)

Significantly, Richard cannot articulate this “something,” either. He speaks self-consciously of “framing everything” with his camera (222) and expounds his “theory of photography if not life itself: the way a frame, a photograph, can illumine and enlarge one’s vision rather than limit it” (223). His second catalogue of images is more poignant, because the images are of Dory, her family, and their house (222-23). Indeed, Richard gets “within shooting range” of Little Luther and Dory’s house (227). Yet Dory resists his careful framing, eluding both his camera and his understanding. “This series of photographs has an indistinct, grainy surface, as if coal dust were blowing palpably through the air” (227-8). Though his comparison is apt, he misses the significance of the coal dust. To him, it is poetic rather than the grimy and persistent agent of black lung disease. Richard’s romanticized view of the mountain folk renders him a literary descendant of Herman Melville’s Amasa Delano, a character prone to misreadings.

Smith disallows Richard’s pictures of Dory in order to highlight the difficulties of representing others accurately and fully. Why does his technology fail him? He explains it thus:

But these pictures did not turn out because the light had gone by then!  
because Dory, at the door, picked just that moment to turn her head.  
She was reduced to an indistinct, stooped shape, the posture of an older  
woman—they age so fast in those mountains anyway--or perhaps it

was simply the angle of her head and the way she stood at the door, her head a mere bright blur. (228)

Smith preserves at least a part of Dory's place-based subjectivity from Richard's voyeuristic gaze. As a character, Richard is transparent, often revealing more than he means to. However, his documentary process serves for the reader-witness as a valuable study of the personal and ethical complexities involved in capturing, collecting, creating, preserving, and representing. According to Suzanne Jones, "There is an absence at the heart of *Oral History* that is the absence of absolute and objective truth. All that we have is stories, Smith the post-modernist implies" (135). In *Oral History*, Dory remains absent from Richard's life. He does not take her with him in 1923, and he cannot even capture an image of her in 1934.

Smith draws a parallel between Richard's camera and the gun wielded by the nameless, angry, unemployed coal miner who approaches Richard's fancy car. The miner shoots Richard's rearview mirror, thereby fracturing his self-image and limiting his freedom of movement. Burlage's representations, though never consumed directly by the denizens of Hoot Owl Holler, become part of an ongoing corpus of images and narration about the region. It is possible that the images do more harm than good in so-called outsiders' minds. To put it another way, the encounter between Richard and the miner illustrates that documentary work can have significant human costs. Indeed, Richard's project, and others like it, result in views that are difficult for marginalized subjects to challenge or replace. As Rabinowitz explains, "The documentary text, then, is deeply invested in narrative forms of difference. Who looks at whom? This question is at the heart of image, word, and sound within documentary rhetoric" (10).

Elizabeth Barret's documentary film, *Stranger with a Camera* (2000), probes this rhetoric. Her film examines a real shooting similar to the one that Smith fictionalizes



in *Oral History*. Furthermore, she takes issue with the hegemonic gaze and argues against representations like the ones Richard has created. Her work reflects upon the power that representations and misrepresentations have, both over the people represented and in the cultural imaginary.

## **Filming Appalachia**

*Stranger with a Camera* re-traces the 1967 murder of Canadian journalist Hugh O'Connor by eastern Kentucky native Hobart Ison. The ostensible cause of the murder was Ison's reaction to what he perceived as inaccurate, insulting, and harmful photographic and filmic images of Appalachia. Barret questions whether these representations were, indeed, cause enough for Ison to shoot O'Connor, to turn his gun on the journalist in the way he felt the camera had been aimed at him and others of the region. Though she does not condone the murder, she entertains the possibility that images could have been just that powerful. Barret's positionality is unique, for she stands as both insider and outsider to this story. She was a senior in high school when the murder occurred, but she also points out that she was from a middle-class family who lived in a county-seat town (Whitesburg) rather than from a poor family that lived in the country. The murder took place in Jeremiah, a small community a few miles outside of Whitesburg. Moreover, members of her family were not coal miners, though the images she saw on the news usually depicted miners and mining disasters, or were associated with Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. She maintains that she is still affected by the murder, and she senses that this is the case for other community members. She also wonders whether Ison's violent act has in fact perpetuated the very stereotypes that she has been combatting for three decades. One of her purposes, then, is to set the record straight.

The film opens with images from O'Connor's films. These images are ethnographic slices of life from various parts of the globe. After a few seconds, these

images give way to footage from black-and-white films about Appalachia. Many of these feature images of hunger and dirtiness. After the sequences, but before a formal introduction, the spectator hears the voices of some of the people affected by the murder: Mason Eldridge, eyewitness and the person O'Connor's crew was documenting when the murder occurred; Hobart Ison's nephew, still a landowner in Hazard County, Kentucky; Richard Black and other members of O'Connor's crew; writer Calvin Trillin, who reads from his 1967 *New Yorker* essay on the event; and Barret. Barret reveals that O'Connor, Black, and others traveled to eastern Kentucky in the fall of 1967 to make an exhibition film called *US* for the Film Board of Canada that would treat the subject of poverty in the United States.

Appalshop, or the Appalachian Film Workshop, was established in Whitesburg, Kentucky, in the early 1970s as a place where locals could learn filmmaking. Many of the early films that came out of this cooperative were made by grass-roots activists and had the dual purposes of promoting social and political change and preserving local customs and culture. Thus, these films served much the same purpose as O'Connor's films. Barret includes clips from a few of her early films that feature women quilting and making salve, an old-time fiddler playing music in a field, and women coal miners. Her films have both contributed to and commented upon what Larry Daressa calls the "iconography of Appalachia": "One of the many strengths of Elizabeth Barret's film is that it locates this event [the murder] within what might be called the iconography of Appalachia, a region she [Barret] describes as 'inundated with picture takers'" (48). More than 30 years later, Barret seeks to understand the 1967 murder and to tell O'Connor's, Ison's, and her stories. She narrates the film and questions the "storyteller's responsibilities" and ethics, stating that there is "a complex relationship between social action and social embarrassment."

In addition to *narrating* the story, Barret inserts herself into it. Her juxtapositions of footage of herself and of images of the two dead men imbricate these disparate lives and reveal the seemingly paradoxical materiality of these images. For example, O'Connor pioneered a filmic technique that projected five images simultaneously on one screen.<sup>16</sup> Footage of O'Connor amidst a religious ceremony in India highlights this technique, popular in ethnographic filmmaking. Interviews with O'Connor's middle-aged daughter and members of the 1967 film crew suggest that he was an intelligent, compassionate man and journalist who did not wish to deliver inaccurate or harmful representations. Rather, he and his crew intended to show parts of America that did not correspond to the prosperous, comfortable mainstream whose images were familiar to Canadian viewers. The crew began their interrogation of images of America by filming in eastern Kentucky. Barret draws attention to acts of filmmaking and image-creation. Accompanying many sequences in Barret's film is the sound of a projector, a sound that imbues the images with both a corporeal and a ghostly quality. Moreover, the noise underscores the audio track, which showcases many subjects' voices and stories.

Barret's presence in the film generates ambivalent reactions, including my own. Her story is valid, her objective noble. At the same time, photographs of her in the homecoming court and in her cheerleading uniform seem oddly disconnected from the story of murder that she attempts to convey. This self-reflexivity serves a purpose, though. Barret's images and narration stand in sharp contrast to Walter Cronkite's in the 1960s television documentaries that she juxtaposes with her own. Her voice is plaintive, inquisitive, and somewhat soft and unassuming. Though she is an insider who possesses firsthand knowledge of the event, her voice carries less of the expected documentary authority than Cronkite's.

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16 This technique is a precursor to IMAX

A representation especially worth examining is Barret's interview with Mason Eldridge, witness to the murder, a coal miner and one of Ison's renters. At the moment of the murder, O'Connor was filming Eldridge (with Eldridge's permission) when Ison approached and shot O'Connor three times with a shotgun. When Barret interviews Eldridge, she sits in his kitchen and lights him softly from behind. He is the only person in the documentary who appears this way, i.e., as an other. As much as I admire the film for its richness of images and considerations of ethics and social responsibility, I cannot help but conclude that Barret turns the same representational lens on Eldridge that she spends the rest of her film trying to contest. His part is small, and he is the only member of his family or community interviewed and included – in person, anyway – in the film. According to Joy Salyers, Erik Barnouw convinced Barret to interview Mason Eldridge (CDS class lecture). She supposedly had not thought of doing so until Barnouw suggested it, though Eldridge's eyewitness perspective is crucial to the story. During the interview, which takes place in Mason's kitchen, Mason stutters and does not make eye contact. The viewer is keenly aware of her gaze at this subject's "difference," evidenced by his difficulty speaking and his apparent discomfort at being filmed, and is brought back to Rabinowitz's formulation of the relationship between gaze and rhetoric. The lighting also highlights Mason's difference; whereas most other subjects are filmed outdoors or in brightly-lit indoor spaces, Mason is bathed in warm, yellow light that falls across his face but leaves most of his home in darkness. Barret asks Mason his view on the American Dream, a question that seems out of place, since it is not clear that she asks her other subjects this question. Mason replies, "I worked for everything I got, and I worked cheap, but it was a pretty good life." His reply seems discordant with Barret's expectations.

Thus, as careful as Barret is to avoid representational problems, the film is not without them. Her work reflects ethnographer John van Maanen's question: "How do we get from observations to representations?" It also illustrates that, as Lee Smith says, a story is "always the teller's tale." Still, by documenting a middle-class, formally educated, female perspective, Barret fills a gap in documentary work about the Mountain South. Perhaps the film's final question is, "Who is the stranger, really?"

### **Tuscany's Letters, Molly's Phenomena, and Simon's Americana in *On Agate Hill***

Lee Smith's *On Agate Hill* (2006) is concerned with documenting history and subjectivity, particularly in accounts that fuse the two. This novel carries on Smith's familiar narrative frame of a young, female student who goes in search of information or introduces a collection of documents, though this novel is set mainly in the Piedmont South (in this case, Hillsborough, in central North Carolina) rather than the Mountain South. In *On Agate Hill*, Smith transmits documents through the young and formerly irresponsible Tuscany Miller, who mails a wide-ranging, mysterious collection to her former professor at the Documentary Studies Program (a nod to the actual Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, at which Smith has researched). Accompanying the collection are her "Notes from Tuscany," earnest, rambling, enthusiastic commentary on the contents and her arrangement of them into a collection. Along with directions to her professor about where the documents were found and how he might read them, she intersperses details and revelations about her own life. This fusion of historical record and subjectivity parallels what occurs inside the frame that Tuscany establishes. In other words, Tuscany not only assembles these documents, she participates by adding her story. Tuscany closes her introduction by writing the glib, "and the rest is history" (3). But the next paragraph,

which consists of a single sentence, reads, “Or I hope you will think it is history” (3), a statement that implies uncertainty about the documents’ validity beyond its personal context. As Fred Hobson writes, “History means the voices of those who long were silenced – largely, although not altogether, women – and history in Lee Smith is a very fluid and subjective commodity” (Hobson i, qtd. in Rebecca Smith). Indeed, it is telling that Tuscany feels compelled to seek validation from an academic at an established institution dedicated to the study of documents. Moreover, her transmission of the documents places her, unwittingly, into a teaching role, because she has taken on the role of organizing and explaining them. Though Smith applauds the institutionalization of folk culture, she often pokes fun at the ways that academia attempts to “legitimize” “folk” cultures.

This opening alerts the reader to the centrality of physical documents in this novel, but it also demonstrates that the documents are not merely devices. Rather, these documents illuminate the inevitable interplay of history and subjectivity, a symbiosis that characterizes Smith’s documentary aesthetic. Moreover, these documents possess a life of their own. Film theorist Bill Nichols writes, “What the documentarist cannot fully control is his or her basic subject: history” (*Representing* 14). Nichols asserts that documentary film and history are intimately related, but he also cautions that documentaries are not objective and that power structures tend to get replicated in documentary work. This thesis applies to Smith’s fiction as well. Her stories explore the connection between history and documentary expression and representational problems that arise in documentary work. Stated more simply, Smith is concerned with whose versions of stories – and histories – get told – and how. Because documentary literature and film aim for representations of reality and collections of evidence, they are associated with truth-telling, a connection that Barbara Foley investigates and underscores in her study of documentary literature.

Yet much of this work, contemporary work not excepted, specializes in top-down versions of history that dismiss the many voices required in the making of even one historical episode. A consequence of top-down histories is that they tend to essentialize marginalized groups, emphasizing otherness and “primitivism.” These versions of events are vexing, particularly for subjects who feel they have been misrepresented. Smith’s *heteroglossia* allows her characters to relate voices-from-the-margins histories, an act of reclamation that renders personal documents as meaningful as official records. Indeed, even official records, such as court depositions, are characterized by stories-within-stories, seemingly unrelated details, and a meandering delivery. Moreover, Smith’s documentary aesthetic creates spaces wherein the reader’s understanding of Southern culture(s) will be both upheld and challenged.

In *On Agate Hill*, the documents include letters, diaries, songs, poems, court depositions, and historical documents from a girls’ boarding school. Included in these pieces of writing are ekphrastic depictions of cultural phenomena, and grouped with these documents are physical objects that belonged to Molly Petree’s, the main character, childhood “collection of phenomena.” Through these various, multi-voiced documents, Smith illuminates struggles with identity and belonging, especially for the women, children, and elderly in the recently post-Civil War South.

Smith’s concerns with the relationship between documentary and place can be seen in her settings. She sets *On Agate Hill* first on a plantation, Agate Hill, in the piedmont region of North Carolina, then at a girls’ boarding school, then in the mountains of North Carolina, and finally in the settlement of Americana, Brazil. The name of the plantation indicates the primacy of place in the novel. Because the novel begins (Tuscany’s frame aside) just after the Civil War, the plantation serves as a

vehicle through which the intertwined themes of individualism and colonialism can be examined and documented.

Immediately after Tuscany's notes comes Molly's diary, which contains a voice from the margins if ever there was one. An orphan, Molly belongs to no one. She feels an intimate connection with place, however, and her diary entries convey that closeness. On the first page of her diary, she vows, in her thirteen-year-old voice, to write "the truth as I see it" (7), a statement that encapsulates nearly any documentary endeavor. In this passage, Smith expresses her character's desire for a document that will deliver the teller's truth. Molly, gaining momentum and conviction as she writes, reiterates her position with the following tenacious declaration: "I will write it all down every true thing in black and white upon the page, for evil or good it is my own true life and I WILL have it. I will" (8; sic throughout). Through this character, Smith presents a bottom-up instead of top-down account.

Smith's documents represent spaces in ways that reveal what Nichols has termed "the emotional geography of space" (*Representing* 41). At the same time that Molly is leading the reader-witness through her psyche, she is leading her up to her cubbyhole, a secret upstairs room that houses her few possessions and affords her escape from the chaotic life on the former plantation. In her descriptions, Molly plays the roles of tour guide and romantic heroine. She describes her surroundings carefully but furtively. Her command of her secret space and her assurance of her role as sole inhabitant situate her in an empowered position, one that informs her writing. As she reveals locations of rooms and explains their functions, she provides a cognitive map of the plantation house's geography. In this way, she acts both as participant and observer, insider and outsider, subject and object of study in her chronicles. Though she has emotional and familial ties to Agate Hill—her mother moved there during the War, and it is the last place Molly has known—she is all too



aware of her marginalized position there, a position underscored by the location of the cubbyhole. Ironically, the one place where she has autonomy is unknown to others.

Smith illuminates phantasmagoric spaces as well as empirical ones. Molly's Uncle Junius says that the plantation possesses a "trick of geography" that allows far-off noises to be heard from inside the house. Molly brings in this description to refer to a ghostly occurrence, or phenomenon, at Agate Hill Plantation during the Civil War. However, this ghostliness or trickery can be applied also to her cubbyhole, which eludes detection and provides an observation perch for her. This domestic "trick of geography" prepares us for the tricks of geography present in each of the novel's settings. Her cubbyhole can also be read as a phenomenon, an unusual and unaccountable happening that shapes Molly's view of her world. How is it that no one else knows of her perch?

Smith's writing dwells in concrete details. This is only fitting, because documentary work often focuses on the concrete and particular. This emphasis is nowhere more apparent than in Molly's collection of "phenomena." Molly and her best friend, Mary White, amass this collection, which even contains the bones of a "Yankee hand" (51-3). This object functions as a metonymic human document, a representation of the separations and ostensible differences and ghosts wrought by the war. Indeed, the war has created many ruins, and these make Molly's and Mary White's project possible. Their collection dovetails with the nineteenth-century practice of collecting, categorizing, and cataloging remarkable artifacts. A cousin to documentary work, this classificatory work is susceptible to the same representational pitfalls and misreadings. The girls invent stories to accompany their finds. For Molly and Mary White, though, the collection of phenomena functions also as a strategy of resistance to colonial rule. In this case, Mary White's traditional,

formidable grandmother embodies colonial rule, maintaining rigid ideas about propriety, especially where gender roles and race relations are concerned.

Photographs and less tangible visual displays inhabit Molly's psyche and influence her behavior throughout her life. She thinks and describes the world in terms of paintings and photographs. In the more private, interior collection of her journal, Molly includes her encounters with visual displays. First, she engages with the photograph of her father, Charles Pleasant Petree, and his friend, Simon Black, who will become her benefactor. Her description, which resembles a museum catalogue description, reads:

here is his image made in camp on the eve of war. Does he not look dashing and daring with his long mustaches and this fancy hat? He looks like he is French, like he is going to a party. With him is Simon Black a friend of his youth then a scout attached to my fathers Company C, Sixth Regiment, South Carolina Cavalry. See how solemn they are staring into the camera as if into the awful future which has now come to pass. My father was b. Edgefield, South Carolina; 1823, d. March 20, 1865, at Bentonville, North Carolina, where he is buried in pieces. (15; sic throughout)

Her urgent impressions jumble with documentary facts. For example, romantic notions of the gallant soldier converge with historical details, such as her father's date and place of birth. Photographic images help her understand other family relationships. After noting that her Uncle Junius reminds her of a man in a picture, Molly writes, "All of a sudden I realize that I am not in this picture either" (27). Her switch to present tense matches her revelation of her aloneness in this moment, which is reminiscent of Janie's coming-to-subjectivity in *Their Eyes Were Watching*

*God*. Molly's discoveries in both real and imagined photographs shape her identity and clarify her relationships to others.

Smith dwells not only on absence, loss, and alienation in Molly's character, however. Amusements also shape her development and perpetuate her sense of wonder. She experiences a magic lantern show and tableaux vivants on her rare trips to Hillsborough. The former "show[s] a running horse" (57), a documentary nod to Eadweard Muybridge's stop-motion photography that paved the way for motion pictures. About the latter, Molly exclaims, "Dear Diary, Now we have been to the Tableaux Vivants, the best and most beautiful thing I have ever witnessed" (66). These details give a fullness to Molly's documentary accounts and situate her as a product of her time, a girl coming of age at the turn of the twentieth century.

Smith telescopes the motif of colonialism through her portrayal of Molly Petree and Simon Black's relationship. Molly is a colonized subject who displays various kinds of resistance—and provides records of this resistance. She spends her life in North Carolina, and an impressive documentary record of her existence has been assembled, both by her and by those who have known her. In contrast, Simon's "full accounting" (332) comes in the form of two letters that he writes to Molly to explain his friendship with her father, his patronage of her, and his life in Americana, Brazil. He has become an accidental colonizer. After the Civil War, he feels displaced (he is an orphan, too, albeit a much older one), and he travels the U.S. South and Mexico, finally settling in Brazil. Earlier in the novel, he explains to Molly why he ventures to Brazil: "I had to get out of this sad old history" (108)—not "country," but "history." Simon Black embodies the geographical trick. Unlike his fellow Confederados, who establish a colony called Americana in hopes of re-creating Southern plantation life (Brazil did not abolish slavery until 1888), he travels to Brazil to be alone and start anew. However, his success with a small blacksmith shop leads to factories, which in

turn lead to his playing a major part in Americana's development. Smith's inclusion of Americana and its diverse inhabitants adds yet another documentary frame, for, as region-focused as her novels are, a transnational current runs through them as well, especially her later works. She documents these cultural and national and geographic shifts. Hsu's recent scholarship on "geographical affect" speaks to Smith's "trick[s] of geography." Hsu argues that "affect [about region and regional belonging] originates not only in isolated, local communities but also in the broader spaces of transnational capitalism" (38). These spaces play out in Simon Black's tales of Americana.

### **A Return to the Frames**

For Tuscany, Molly, and Simon, the documentary impulse is rooted in a twinned sense of loneliness and familial responsibility. Which of Molly's observations about the photograph of her father ring true at the end of the novel? She never learns about him, after all. She has only the idea that he is "a soldier and a scholar" and possesses only her own account of his life. She has the desire to reach out to others, and she also feels responsible for bearing witness to and keeping records of the inhabitants and events of Agate Hill because no one else can. No one else remains to do it. Molly herself is a phenomenon and an artifact. Moreover, her documents, as well as documents about her, serve as artifacts of her time and place. Tuscany perpetuates the circulation of Molly's documents. In fact, she breathes life into them and perpetuates personal documentary histories. During this process, she undergoes a rite of passage, to borrow a term from both anthropology and the bildungsroman. Because history in *On Agate Hill* is anything but static, Smith's novel feels as though it could not have been told without the use of documents and the documentary framework. People narrate history, but they also act in it. We bear the vital responsibilities, Smith suggests, of hearing others' voices and of contributing our

own. Smith obeys her own imperative by using fiction to document the culture of southern Appalachia and pass on stories to reader-witnesses.

At the end of *Oral History*, the reader-witness learns that while Jennifer is writing her naive observations, the tape recorder she has left in an old, haunted cabin is recording the stories that belong to this place. A rocking chair seems to rock on its own but is inhabited by different storytellers who leave their distinctive voices on the tape, thereby weaving a document of intimate, imbricated histories. The cabin itself is an archive, literally “house of record.” Through these voices, Smith has achieved a complex aural realism. Smith’s final character in *Oral History*, Sally (daughter of Dory and Richard), envisions her half-brother, Almarine, constructing a theme park called Ghostland, which will result in the commodification of rural, “folk” culture. It will feature a rocking chair inhabited by ghosts who tell their oral histories. In a sense, Al’s entrepreneurial idea constitutes documentary preservation, albeit with a sensational bent. It will give the visitors what they would expect to see: Appalachian folkways reified. The theme park, a simulacrum of mountain life, will have more in common with Burlage’s treatment of the area than with other accounts in the novel. The novel ends with Smith’s implication that Jennifer’s project is more than she can handle and that she will treat her material in much the same way that Richard has treated his. The presence of the tape explains the many voices and stories, but it does not explain everything. Rebecca Smith notes, “At its [*Oral History*’s] core remains a central mystery about the knowledge of nature and history” (59).

Smith lays bare the process of documenting, thereby cultivating a meta-documentary approach. The process of documenting allows her characters to explore subjectivity and the ways that documents allow, shape, and communicate subjectivity. In conjunction with the study of subjectivity, she explores her

characters' motives for documenting. The documents we create mirror our cultural identities, concerns, desires, and anxieties. By using these documents to structure her fiction, Smith reflects these concerns back to us. Smith's documentary fiction performs crucial cultural work. All documents bear traces of the histories and cultures that produced them. Like Faulkner, Smith adds versions to mainstream versions of history. Her novels use documents and documentary techniques, but they also exist *as* documents of a region and a people. Smith remains active in documentary fiction and other documentary pursuits. She maintains close ties to southwest Virginia, traveling there regularly to give readings and conduct writing workshops. She has researched at Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies, which promotes community-based documentary work. That kind of work is, ultimately, what Smith accomplishes in her fiction.

## Conclusion

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“Truth is beyond any realism, and the appearance of things should not be confused with their essence.”

—Juan Gris

“Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.”

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

“In the beginning was the sound.”

—Tom Leonard

In this dissertation, I have theorized a literary documentary aesthetic that emerged in American literature in the late nineteenth century. Before launching into an examination of works from this realist-naturalist period, I framed the dissertation with a reading of Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” in which I asserted that Melville’s fiction relies upon acts of document creation and manipulation. These documents encompass court depositions, bodies, and personal narratives. Melville’s work is situated on the cusp of the literary documentary aesthetic that forms at the end of the nineteenth century. My first chapter, “Labors of Vision,” analyzes Stephen Crane’s amalgamated documentary approach to his socially-conscious, journalistic sketches, in particular an 1894 sketch titled “In the Depths of a Coal Mine.” Chapter Two, “Charles W. Chesnutt’s Documentary Eyes,” looks closely at how Chesnutt uses the American eye and literary-photographic double exposure in his 1901 novel, *The Marrow of Tradition*, to document the 1898 race riot in Wilmington, North Carolina. Contemporary novelist Lee Smith’s method of storytelling through documents and

documentary frames composes the focus of Chapter Three, “‘Always the Teller’s Tale.’” Smith’s documents fuse history and subjectivity to highlight women’s ways of telling and knowing.

Just as any documentary effort has gaps, so, too, does any scholarly project. I am keenly aware of my failings. One topic I have yet to explore fully is the destruction of documents. As I mentioned in “Labors of Vision,” fires may bring about acts of documentation, but what about when these fires, whether cultural or natural, consume documents? What do we do about history, witnessing, and representation in the aftermath of the destroyed archive? Currently, I am researching the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and its aftermath. Filmic and photographic footage of this event exists, and I wish to place this documentary evidence in conversation with the burning of the San Francisco courthouse. The burned immigration papers actually resulted in a liberatory moment for the city’s mainly Asian immigrants, who were able to claim citizenship when the government could not prove otherwise. I am studying also William James’s on-the-ground essay about the eruption and its phenomenological import.

I call for further research on the disclaimers so present in 1930s documentary books. What is their true function? In documentary fiction, the disclaimers generally stress the work’s veracity; in the documentary book, the disclaimers acknowledge – and sometimes apologize for – the book’s departures from facts, its (inevitable) fictional elements. Examples include Erskine Caldwell’s and Margaret Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces* and James Agee’s and Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In fiction, this device serves as a “testimonial apparatus” (Foley 254) or “authenticating preface” (Foley 255). I am theorizing the nature and function of the disclaimer in so-called nonfiction documentary books.



I call for research on the rhetoric of current audio documentary work. What kind of world does National Public Radio's *This American Life* bring us into, for example? What does it mean that the radio show expanded into a television show on Showtime? A new print collection called *Reality Radio*, put out by the press at the Center for Documentary Studies, illustrates how wide-ranging and far-reaching audio documentaries are. I sense a fascination with the voice that has emerged in our hyper-visual world. It is as if sound makes people, places, and objects more real. (The literature I study possesses strong auditory components as well.) Moreover, much of this work features voices from the margins. I am drawn to investigate how these margins may be shifting.

Documentary literature continues to evolve. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a body of documentary literature and a much more pronounced use of the documentary aesthetic can be discerned. I close with another documentary frame, this one constructed from contemporary documentary poetry. In his 2008 collection of poems, *A Murmuration of Starlings*, Jake Adam York offers a radical documentary poetics of racial reconciliation. In the "Notes" following the poems, York writes, "*A Murmuration of Starlings* is part of an ongoing project to elegize and memorialize the martyrs of the Civil Rights movement, whose names are inscribed on the stone table of the Civil Rights Memorial that stands today outside the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama" (81). This work of memorialization is public work, work that has the potential to alter received notions of the history of race in America.

York's poems bring together the concerns I have treated in this dissertation: radical representations, eruptive moments, ekphrastic visuality; the melding of official documents and popular culture; and the political and personal difficulties involved in documenting and preserving. York re-tells the story of Emmett Till and

other figures whose stories led up to or were part of the Civil Rights movement. In 1955, Till was a 14-year-old boy from Chicago visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi. He allegedly “wolf-whistled” at a white woman named Carolyn Bryant. This enraged her husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother, Ray Milam, and they abducted, beat, and drowned Till by tying a cotton-gin fan around his neck.

The poem “Substantiation” centers on the jury deliberations in the trial of Bryant and Milam, the men accused – but not convicted – of murdering Till. York has the jury say collectively, “That they should sit a while / and drink a pop, to make it look right, look real” (12). Here, the emphasis is on creating the illusion of fairness in their deliberations. York connects this crucial deliberation to the most mundane of commodities, a “pop.” York also explores the carelessness with which the case’s evidence is treated and the accidental transmission that it undergoes:

When the contractor guts the courthouse basement,  
 the fan and the transcript are laid out on the street.  
 Junkmen salvage metal, and the papers warp and tear  
 in the rain. Starlings pick through the gutters’ wreck  
 and weave typescript fragments into their nests. (15)

The language here is visceral, as the words “guts,” “tear,” and “wreck” demonstrate. Traces remain of this case, but they are appropriated for uses other than legal ones. In York’s formulation, the starlings may be invasive, but they are also always present, always witnesses, and the evidence does not disappear completely.

York's liberatory figures are starlings and Sun Ra, a jazz musician from Birmingham who claimed to have been transported to Saturn and to have contact with other dimensions. This contact informed his music and helped him to transcend racial oppression. Starlings were brought to America in 1890 by Eugene Schieffelin, who wanted to introduce every species of bird mentioned in Shakespeare's works. The starling is an invasive species that takes over other species' nests. It also mimics other bird calls, using this masking as a survival technique. A murmuration is an archaic word for flock, but it also suggests the word murmur. York juxtaposes the release of starlings in New York's Central Park to a lynching photograph from the same year:

A thousand miles away, in Arkansas,  
 six men pose beneath a tree. In the photograph,  
  
 the hanged man's sweater's buttoned tight,  
 his hat, his head raked to hide the noose.

One man stills the body with his cane.  
 Another moves to point, but his arm is blurred.  
 ...Just one thing's in motion. (1-2)

The poem "At Liberty" (Appendix 4) discusses the undocumented murder of Herbert Lee, supposedly committed in self-defense. Here, the lack of photographic evidence mirrors the refusal to see injustices: "and there are no photographs," "so there is no photograph and no one sees." There is no photograph, so a hate crime did

not happen, or so the logic goes. The focus on collective agreement is similar to the way that the communities of Jeremiah and Whitesburg, Kentucky, rallied around Hobart Ison in the aftermath of Hugh O'Connor's murder in *Stranger with a Camera*.

York draws upon filmic and photographic documents as well, weaving these into his own nested, poetic documents. In the poem "The Crowd He Becomes," York writes about the moment a church bombing occurs.

From "The Crowd He Becomes"

15 September 1963, Birmingham

See him Christmas, few years back,  
 outside the preacher's house, thin fuse of cigarette,  
 newspaper spread on the bus protests.  
 See flash, shock push him from the dark,  
 burn his shadow where anyone could see.  
 Something dark in the lenses of the bottle trees. (27)

Here, the flash mimics a camera's flash. The bottle trees, placed on the ends of branches to keep spirits inside, capture the image and signal that the African American community knows who dynamited the preacher's house, but no evidence exists, or if it does, it remains secreted inside the bottle trees. York's documentary poetics layer story upon story of racial injustice for the reader-witness to observe and

understand. The poems conflate past and present and involve the reader-witness in both.

In a sense, a documentary aesthetic has always accompanied literary creation. I find that we need documentary work, if for no other reason than to make us more aware of and responsive to what Robert Coles has deemed “the call of stories.” Documentary work, whether literature, film, photography, performance art, or some combination, brings stories into the public sphere. Patricia Aufderheide reminds us of John Dewey’s view that “the public – the body so crucial to the health of a democratic society – is not just individuals added up” but is instead a group that works together to promote the public good (5). This is a critical moment for studying documentary work, for it has become quite popular and prevalent, nearly a national obsession, and thus merits increased scholarly attention. I join Nichols, Rabinowitz, and Foley in outlining theories of documentary work in territory that remains relatively uncharted. This dissertation identifies, defines, and analyzes a literary documentary aesthetic while acknowledging its fault lines. It asserts, too, that documentary scholarship possesses compelling use value. For example, because of their public nature, how might documentary aesthetics and documentary literature be part of the larger project of re-thinking the relevance of the humanities in the university? In addition, and perhaps relatedly, how might my study be representative of interdisciplinary work possible in reconfigured humanities departments?

I hope that my dissertation’s flashes have illuminated the documentary aesthetic that I sense so strongly in the literature I have studied.

## Coda: Getting Involved

“Research can never be a once-and-for-all affair, nor is there ever a single use to which evidence can put.”

—Raphael Samuel, “Perils of the Transcript”

In the Introduction, I noted that the word “documentary” comes from the Latin *docere*, to teach. My dissertation has grown out of a writing and rhetoric course, “The Documentary: Acts of Witnessing, Rhetorics of Representation,” that I designed and have offered for the past three years. In this class, we analyze how various documentary works, well, work. We also tackle the question of how to read documentary literature now that we have so many other types, often competing ones, of documentary work. We think about how we document ourselves, and about how our documentary practices and offerings influence others. In line with this, we undertake service-learning projects to ground the concepts in experiences and to give our work heft beyond the classroom.

For the past year, I have been taking coursework at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University so that I can learn to produce documentaries instead of just write about them. The courses have ranged from an intensive introduction to documentary studies to workshops on audio postcards and writing for radio. These courses always take me in new directions in my research and teaching. Now, for my final project at CDS, I am beginning a documentary of my own, one that both excites and baffles me. I wish to tell the story of my time at Si Tanka College, a tribal college on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation in northwestern South Dakota. I lived and taught on the reservation for two years, from 2000 until 2002. I want also to tell the story of the college’s closure in 2005 and see whether I can discern and record the effects that this closure has had on the community, particularly the female

community. (By far the majority of my students were single mothers in their mid-to-late twenties.) Have opportunities been circumscribed, or, in this age of distance and online education, has the lack of a college made much difference in the quality of life and quantity of opportunities? How do I blend these stories? Perhaps more important, how will my “American eye” color the project?

Documentary work is an act of love. This dissertation epitomizes the concept of epistemophilia. One subject leads to another leads to another. This approach suits me well, for I have many loves and many paths to follow.

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## Appendix 1

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### Letter of Pliny the Younger on the eruption of Mount Vesuvius

— Translated by Professor Cynthia Damon of Amherst College

My dear Tacitus,

You say that the letter I wrote for you about my uncle's death made you want to know about my fearful ordeal at Misenum (this was where I broke off). "The mind shudders to remember ... but here is the tale."

After my uncle's departure I finished up my studies, as I had planned. Then I had a bath, then dinner and a short and unsatisfactory night. There had been tremors for many days previously, a common occurrence in Campania and no cause for panic. But that night the shaking grew much stronger; people thought it was an upheaval, not just a tremor. My mother burst into my room and I got up. I said she should rest, and I would rouse her (sc. if need be). We sat out on a small terrace between the house and the sea. I sent for a volume of Livy; I read and even took notes from where I had left off, as if it were a moment of free time; I hardly know whether to call it bravery, or foolhardiness (I was seventeen at the time). Up comes a friend of my uncle's, recently arrived from Spain. When he sees my mother and me sitting there, and me even reading a book, he scolds her for her calm and me for my lack of concern. But I kept on with my book.

Now the day begins, with a still hesitant and almost lazy dawn. All around us buildings are shaken. We are in the open, but it is only a small area and we are afraid, nay certain, that there will be a collapse. We decided to leave the town finally; a dazed crowd follows us, preferring our plan to their own (this is what passes for wisdom in a panic). Their numbers are so large that they slow our departure, and



then sweep us along. We stopped once we had left the buildings behind us. Many strange things happened to us there, and we had much to fear.

The carts that we had ordered brought were moving in opposite directions, though the ground was perfectly flat, and they wouldn't stay in place even with their wheels blocked by stones. In addition, it seemed as though the sea was being sucked backwards, as if it were being pushed back by the shaking of the land. Certainly the shoreline moved outwards, and many sea creatures were left on dry sand. Behind us were frightening dark clouds, rent by lightning twisted and hurled, opening to reveal huge figures of flame. These were like lightning, but bigger. At that point the Spanish friend urged us strongly: "If your brother and uncle is alive, he wants you to be safe. If he has perished, he wanted you to survive him. So why are you reluctant to escape?" We responded that we would not look to our own safety as long as we were uncertain about his. Waiting no longer, he took himself off from the danger at a mad pace. It wasn't long thereafter that the cloud stretched down to the ground and covered the sea. It girdled Capri and made it vanish, it hid Misenum's promontory. Then my mother began to beg and urge and order me to flee however I might, saying that a young man could make it, that she, weighed down in years and body, would die happy if she escaped being the cause of my death. I replied that I wouldn't save myself without her, and then I took her hand and made her walk a little faster. She obeyed with difficulty, and blamed herself for delaying me.

Now came the dust, though still thinly. I look back: a dense cloud looms behind us, following us like a flood poured across the land. "Let us turn aside while we can still see, lest we be knocked over in the street and crushed by the crowd of our companions." We had scarcely sat down when a darkness came that was not like a moonless or cloudy night, but more like the black of closed and unlighted rooms. You could hear women lamenting, children crying, men shouting. Some were calling for

parents, others for children or spouses; they could only recognize them by their voices. Some bemoaned their own lot, other that of their near and dear. There were some so afraid of death that they prayed for death. Many raised their hands to the gods, and even more believed that there were no gods any longer and that this was one last unending night for the world. Nor were we without people who magnified real dangers with fictitious horrors. Some announced that one or another part of Misenum had collapsed or burned; lies, but they found believers. It grew lighter, though that seemed not a return of day, but a sign that the fire was approaching. The fire itself actually stopped some distance away, but darkness and ashes came again, a great weight of them. We stood up and shook the ash off again and again, otherwise we would have been covered with it and crushed by the weight. I might boast that no groan escaped me in such perils, no cowardly word, but that I believed that I was perishing with the world, and the world with me, which was a great consolation for death.

At last the cloud thinned out and dwindled to no more than smoke or fog. Soon there was real daylight. The sun was even shining, though with the lurid glow it has after an eclipse. The sight that met our still terrified eyes was a changed world, buried in ash like snow. We returned to Misenum and took care of our bodily needs, but spent the night dangling between hope and fear. Fear was the stronger, for the earth was still quaking and a number of people who had gone mad were mocking the evils that had happened to them and others with terrifying prognostications. We still refused to go until we heard news of my uncle, although we had felt danger and expected more.

You will read what I have written, but will not take up your pen, as the material is not the stuff of history. You have only yourself to blame if it seems not even proper stuff for a letter. Farewell.

## Appendix 2

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### Additional photos from Riis's "How the Other Half Lives"

**Figure A.1 — "A Black-and-tan dive in "Africa""**

Jacob Riis, from *How the Other Half Lives*



**Figure A.2—“A down-town “morgue””**  
Jacob Riis, from *How the Other Half Lives*



**Figure A.3—“Miners leaving entrance to coal mine near Scranton, PA.”**  
Bain News Service Publisher, from Library of Congress



## Appendix 3

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### "Molly Maguires"

— Bill Martin and Phil Coulter

Make way for the Molly Maguires

They're drinkers, they're liars but they're men

Make way for the Molly Maguires

You'll never see the likes of them again

Down the mines no sunlight shines

Those pits they're black as hell

In modest style they do their time

It's Paddy's prison cell

And they curse the day they've travelled far

Then drown their tears with a jar

So make way for the Molly Maguires

They're drinkers, they're liars but they're men

Make way for the Molly Maguires

You'll never see the likes of them again

Backs will break and muscles ache

Down there there's no time to dream

Of fields and farms, of women's arms  
Just dig that bloody seam  
Though they drain their bodies underground  
Who'll dare to push them around

So make way for the Molly Maguires  
They're drinkers, they're liars but they're men  
Make way for the Molly Maguires  
You'll never see the likes of them again

So make way for the Molly Maguires  
They're drinkers, they're liars but they're men  
Make way for the Molly Maguires  
You'll never see the likes of them again

## Appendix 4

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### "At Liberty"

—Jake Adam York

21 September 1961, Liberty, Mississippi

Everyone will say he drove to the gin  
with a truck full of cotton so he drives to the gin  
and gets in line and everyone will say  
the congressman pulled in behind him so he gets out  
yelling *Herbert Lee I'm not messing with you this time*  
and his affidavit will say Lee had a tire iron  
and there are no photographs so there is  
a tire iron and since the congressman will say  
Lee swung at him his hand will grasp the iron  
under the tangle of his own dead weight  
and the congressman will leave and will not  
see him again so he just lies there bleeding  
and no one will touch him so for a time  
he is just a story or a huddle of starlings  
or crows or a cloud of bottle-flies that might  
explode and disappear until the witnesses  
can say he's there and an undertaker can come  
with a hearse from the next county over



and then he is dead and the congressman can  
tell his story so Herbert Lee will rise  
from his coffin and swing his iron  
and the FBI can come to make him into evidence  
but someone will have roped him into his grave  
so there is no photograph and no one sees  
the cotton boll wicking blood so there is no boll  
only a clear, white negative in the dark  
and a paper that slowly fills with flies. (6)

## Appendix 5

### Timeline

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1811 – Earthquake in New Madrid, Missouri

1827 – Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*

1838 – Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*

1856 – Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno" and "Bartleby, the Scrivener" in *The Piazza Tales*

1861-65 – American Civil War

1872 – Yellowstone National Park established

1877 – Economic Panic – Great Upheaval

1878 – *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

1882 – Chinese Exclusion Act

1883 – Krakatoa erupts in Indonesia

1890 – Massacre at Wounded Knee

1890 – Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*

1890 – William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes*

1892 – Henry James's "The Real Thing"

1892 – Chinese Exclusion Act renewed

1894 – Pullman and Homestead Strikes; many other labor upheavals

1894 – Stephen Crane's "In the Depths of a Coal Mine" in *McClure's Magazine*; city sketches for the *New York World*

1893-4 – Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

1896 – *Plessy vs Ferguson*

1898 – Race riot in Wilmington, North Carolina

1898 – Spanish-American War

1900 – Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*

- 1901 – Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition*
- 1902 – Jack Thorne’s (David Bryant Fulton) *Hanover; or The Persecution of the Lowly: A Story of the Wilmington Massacre.*
- 1903 – W.E.B. du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*
- 1906 – San Francisco earthquake; documents burn; film footage of the earthquake exists; William James writes about being in Oakland when the earthquake hit
- 1914-18 - U.S. involvement in the Great War
- 1925 – Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time*
- 1929 – Great Depression begins
- 1930-1936 – John Dos Passos’s U.S.A. trilogy of *The 42nd Parallel*, *Nineteen Nineteen*, and *The Big Money*
- 1934 – Charles Reznikoff’s *Testimony*
- 1936 – Pare Lorentz’s *The Plow That Broke the Plain*
- 1937 – Margaret Bourke White’s and Erskine Caldwell’s *You Have Seen Their Faces*
- 193\_ – Dreiser’s *Harlan Miners Speak*
- 1938 – Muriel Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead”
- 1938 – Pare Lorentz’s *The River*
- 1939 – John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*
- 1940 – Sherwood Anderson’s *Hometown*
- 1941 – Richard Wright’s *12 Million Black Men*
- 1941 – James Agee’s and Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*
- 1941-45 – U.S. involvement in World War II
- 1957 – Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*
- 1965 – Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*
- 1968- present – Lee Smith’s fiction
- 1975 – E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*
- 2000 – Elizabeth Barret’s *Stranger with a Camera*

2001-present—U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

2008—Jake Adam York's *A Murmuration of Starlings*